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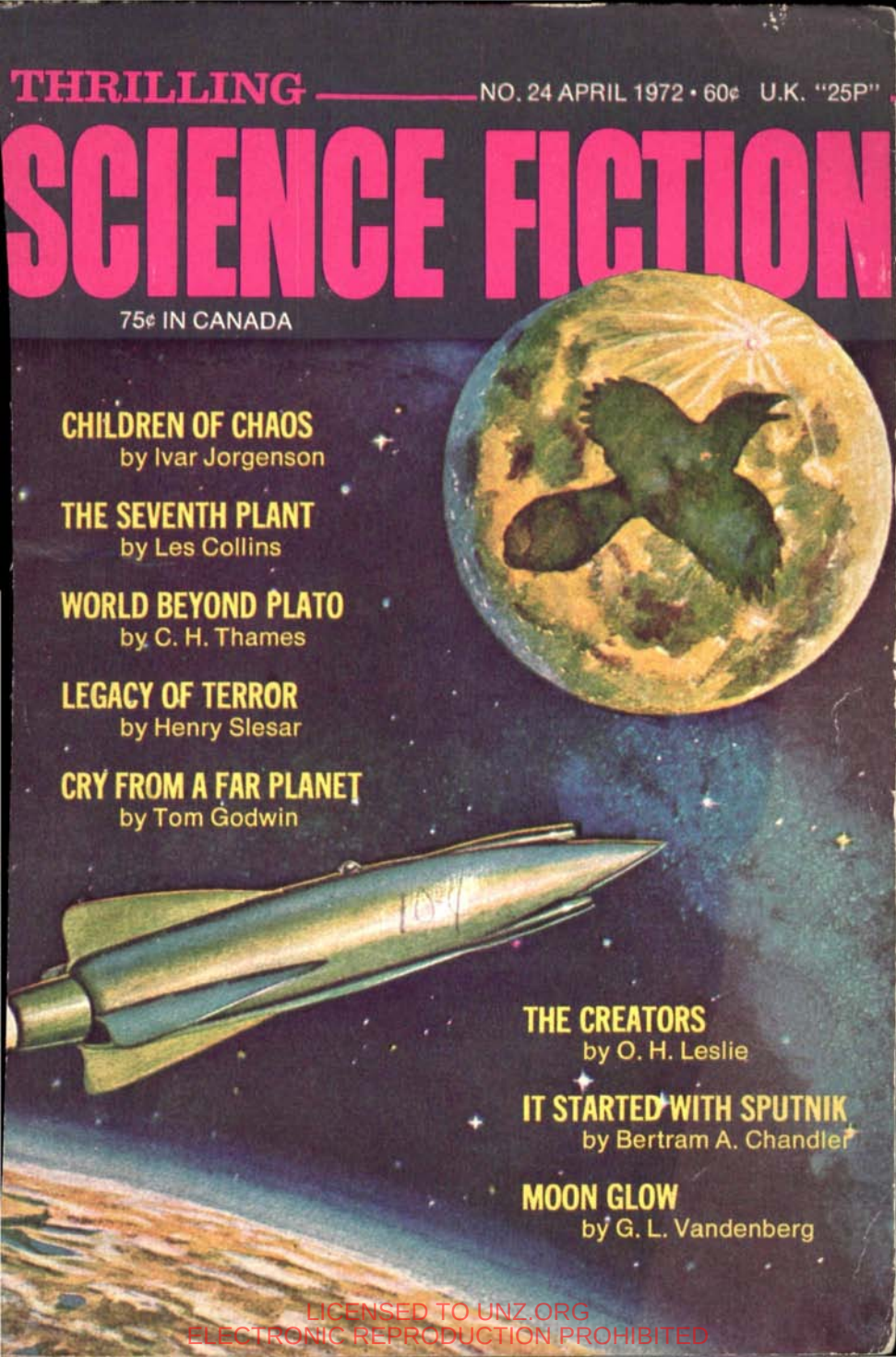

CHILDREN OF CHAOS
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EXCITING STORIES IN STRANGE WORLDS

THRILLING SCIENCE FICTION

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NO. 24 • 1972

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CHILDREN OF CHAOS

By IVAR JORGENSEN

Born to an age of destruction these Sons and Daughters of Disaster said, "Stand back! We'll show you how to really blow this world into stardust. Then you can start over."

SO OKAY, so maybe a guy who lost his private investigator's license over a little thing like libel *isn't* the best guy to stumble over a thing like the Kids. So maybe the same guy—who had to start selling brushes door-to-door to keep on eating—*ain't* the best guy to save the World. So the hell what? So *somebody* had to do it, and it just happened I knew Niles Pfizer from when I was a private eye, and he called me when he found her body. So don't beef; you still breathe regular, and you don't have bombs sending your house into the sky—with you in it.

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So don't beef. I had a *right* to beef; it was dirty, all the way through; but *you*, you've got no reason to beef at all; absolutely none.

The beefing started for me at five in the morning, one day about three months ago. I was pounding my ear and hand-measuring Sophia's bosom for publicity releases, when the damned phone went off like a shotgun in my head. I cursed the Italian Board of Commerce for disturbing me, and then realized it wasn't a brace of Sicilian partisans shooting at me, but just the phone. I disentangled myself from the sweaty sheets, un-muggied my mouth, and flopped around till my hand encountered the phone.

"Mggg?" I asked.

"Lunch? Is that you, Ray?"

"Szm-mggg," I conceded, and started to drift back to the sunny climes and heaving hills.

"Ray! Damit, Ray, answer me. Is that you? Niles Pfizer on this end, Lunch. Damn you, *wake up!*"

Bang! That was the secret phrase. Down came the duck, and handed me a five-hundred-dollar bill for saying the common everyday secret phrase, and I snapped awake. "Yeah, yeah, Niles. It's me. angrily, "—what hour is it?" What the hell you doing calling me at this hour. By the way—" I interrupted myself

"Never mind the kidding around, Ray. I got trouble. I'm not fooling . . . I walked in here and, oh, for the luva heaven, Ray, you should see her, she's . . ." He went off in a fit of deep breathing, as though he had his first shove into his mouth, and in the silence I said:

"What the blazes is happening over there, Niles? You flipped your snapper tonight?"

He came back real strong, and tight, as though he were speaking for clarity, and said slowly, "Ray, I need your help. I need it now. Can you come over here right now?"

I reached up a bit and clicked on the bed lamp. The portable clock by the phone read 5:17 and I screwed one of my baby-blue eyes to the darkness outside the window. "What the hell, Niles! Are you kidding or something? If this is another one of your stupid Behemian practical jokes . . ."

His tone was so drippy with scare I knew he wasn't kidding. Niles as a glamour photographer was one of the best in New York, even though he was a snob and had always had a bit too much money and

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momma's apron string for his own good; he was addicted to practical jokery, but this just didn't sound right. There was a keen edge of hysteria in his voice. "Ray—"

Just that one damned desperate word, and I knew I'd lost sleep for that night.

"Okay, Niles. Sit tight. I'll be right over, whatever it is."

Silence for a second, then, softly, gratefully, "Thanks a million, Ray. It's pretty bad over here. I'm—"

I cut him off. "I'll be on my way in ten. Have a pot of coffee on. At least at this hour I won't have to apologize for freeloading." I hung on him, and got out of bed.

That was the beginning of the beef, but far from the end.

Niles Pfizer lived in one of those classy apartments above the shops on Sullivan Street in the Village. It was the sort of place that had a good North light, a long flight of stairs, and about ten thousand dollars' worth of modern furniture and immitation-Klee designs on the walls. I always took my time walking that flight from the street, because Niles had thoughtfully hung about half a hundred glossies in frames, of his most famous glamour shots. I had to admit it, Niles had one huluvan eye for the roundity and the pointedy. This time I took the stairs two at a time.

As I hit the last flight, turning sharp around the bannister, I stopped. The light was out in the hall. That was not like Niles. He hated darkness—always said his livelihood and life depended on light—and would never have let a bulb burn out in that hall.

Then I heard the sounds of a scuffle above me, and a second later a sort of nasty pffft! I took that last flight at a dead run. It was darker than the inside of a boot, and I came up snout-first against the closed door of the apartment. But it wasn't really closed, just shut nearly all the way, and I kept right on going. I slammed into the middle of the room, and by the moonlight pouring down through the skylight saw four figures tusseling around. I recognized one of them at once; it was the long-nosed, nearly-bald profile of Pfizer. The other three were shorter, and they were doing something unhappy to the photographer.

Where Niles's belly should have been, there was a pulsing blue glow—and through the glow I could see the darkness of the room. They had blown a hole clean through him.

He was still standing somehow, and the three were more

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surprised than frightened, it seemed to me. I spent only a moment allowing myself to seem, and took a dive for the ones nearest me. I came down hard on one of them, and locked both my hands together. I put my clasped hands hard against his left temple, and heard a dull thunk as I belted him. He staggered off sidewise, clutching his head, and moved away just in time for me to belt the second one in the mouth.

The louse had buck teeth!

I thought for a minute I'd broken every finger on my right hand. I had to backhand the slob with my left, and he tumbled over his own legs hitting the deck.

The third one was busily clubbing Niles in the skull, and for a second he didn't quite realize he was being visited. I had just enough time to pick up a wrought-iron candlestick holder from the table beside the door, and swing it with all my might. Man, did he squish! It caught him dead-eye in the nose, and he bleated as though I'd ripped it off. He followed his buddy.

The first one was still standing . . . I hadn't really cold-caulked him . . . and I didn't know it till he slammed me with a sledgehammer. It must have been a sledgehammer, because I heard the clang. I spun around—half of my own volition, half because the blow had sent me that way—and put two fingers on his Adam's apple. He went gluggity and took a header. He hit the deck and swam the length of the carpet glugging. I picked him out through the dusk and the moonlight and the fuzz in my head, and took a two-step toward him. The one was a step, the two was a kick. It caught him right in the neck and he just collapsed like a bride's first cake.

For a moment I stood there, swaying, while the gray lining of my skull pulsed in and out. Then I saw the blue glow that was the middle of Niles Pfizer, sink to the floor. I staggered to the wall, and hit the light switch. The joint was crawling with bodies.

In a heap nearest me, the three slobs were still stoned. In the middle foreground, Niles Pfizer was lying on his side, clutching his wounded middle, and breathing heavily. His face was a dead white, and in the light, the blue glow was gone. But the hole wasn't.

He was dying.

In the background was still another body. She was all hunched over on the model's stand, stark naked, and with-

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out much of her head left. Whatever had done anything as ugly as that to a head as pretty as hers had been, had done it not by blasting, but by melting. The bone showed through starkly, and it wasn't shattered, but run-together and soft looking, as though she had been made of glass, and they had played an oxy-acetylene torch on her.

Hell, she had been dead for some time.

"R-Ray . . ." I heard Niles gasp, and dragged my eyes off the nude body on the stand. He was staring up at me out of pain-clogged eyes, and I could see he was heading out but quick. I went over to him, my head still throbbing, and bent over. He tried to raise up, and succeeded in getting onto one elbow. I helped him a little, cradling his head on my lap.

He looked up and tried a grin. It didn't show through the pain. "Th-they must have been watching from outside . . ." he said slowly. Each word was a torment. "Af-ter I—I called you . . . they came in. They d-didn't even s-say any, anything. Th-they l-looked around, and searched m-me, and then I tried t-to get away, Ray. They shot me with a-a—something, and it burns, Ray. It burns so bad. You'll never know how it burns in me, Ray." His face twisted in a hideous grimace, and for an instant I thought he was bailing out on me. I bent lower, as his eyelids closed, but he kept right on talking. I'd never credited the guy with so much gut.

"H-her n-n-name was Martita Delgado," he said, gasping, but going on doggedly as if he was keeping Death away by talking. "I was going t-to do some late-night stuff, w-with the city as a b-b-backdrop . . . up on th-the roof. She g-got here a little bit before me, and let her-herself in. M-most of m-my model's have their own keys—" he gave me that devillish grin the girls thought was so sexy, even with all that pain in him, and I had to grin back or regret it the rest of my life. The guy was going to get it all out before he conked, and I was going to stick with him till the end.

"W-when I g-got here, she was d-d-dead, and I l-looked th-through her stuff. She had a card in her purse, R-R-R . . ." he couldn't get my name out. I nodded to show I understood. "It's underneath the canvas over th-there—" he pointed to a stack of artist's canvases leaning against the far wall. "Th-they must have come back for it, or for something,

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and they f-found me h-h-here.

"I d-don't know what they w-wanted, Ray. But they didn't get it . . . they d-dinnnt guhhhh . . ."

He trailed off and was gone as silently as the shadows.

I let his head slip down, and avoided looking at the hole where his gut had been. How he had lived long enough to give me such a detailed history I'l never to this day know, but but it had been compulsive. He had willed himself to tell me everything he knew, as though he'd known I'd need it.

Damn him . . . he had made me a party to it all, just by that speech. Just by giving it all, pouring it all out, he had made me an integral part of this tragedy. Now I was in it, because of all he had said and I was the only one who knew it, and because I held his head in my lap, and because of a hundred other things.

I sat there on my knees, and cursed myself and him for dying, and the whole world for making me a stinking moralist, and putting me into something I didn't want.

Ever since I'd lost my ticket, I'd sworn to myself I'd stay away from trouble. Now here it was eating at my leg, and making me jump into the cauldron. I wanted out, but there was no way out.

I had to follow through, or know I'd be damned if I didn't.

I let his body slip off my lap, onto the floor, and started to get up. I had never been the closest friends with Niles Pfizer, but now we were brothers and I had to—not avenge his death; hell, that was corny and just not true—find out what was behind all this. Who had done it, and why. I *had* to, just because I *had* to! He'd stuck me with it, right through to the end.

I stood up, and heard the three hoods moving around behind me, on the floor. I turned to them, and they were all awake, and groggy, and looking at one another. They didn't say a word, and how they communicated I don't know, but each of them touched a thumb hard to the depression behind their left ears, and, well, I don't believe it myself, so why the hell should you—they turned to dust.

Just like that. No by-your-leave. No farewells or shuffle-off-to-Buffalos, they just were three tidy heaps of dust on the floor. Pouff! Gone!

I stared at the dust for a minute, and thought I was losing my mind completely. What the blazes was this? What the hell was happening?

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Was this a long, detailed nightmare?

Wakened out of a dead sleep, hauled down to a Bohemian photographer's studio, attacked by three thugs, seen a friend have a big glowing blue hole blown in him, seen a nude model with another hole in her head, and now the three hoods had collapsed into dust —why, of course, I must be dreaming!

I didn't pinch myself, I methodically walked over to the edge of the table and banged my crazy bone down on it. It hurt like hell, and I knew I was awake.

Pfizer was dead, Martita Delgado was dead, and the hoods were dust at my feet. Poof, like that.

Before I knew what I was doing, and before I could draw my senses around me to get me the hell out of there, I was at the canvases, and puttering around till I found the little square of pasteboard stuck in the back of a canvas. It was hardly visible.

I took it out, and read the name and address someone—I assumed it had been Martita Delgado—had written in ink. It said Freidl, 6682 Riverside Drive, GR 2-7390. I turned the card over.

In neat block print it said:

CHILDREN OF CHAOS
Sins of our fathers, our heritage.

And underneath that was a line with the word *Advocate* under it. Martita Delgado had signed the card. I had the impression if she had had enough ball-point blood to use, she would have signed the thing in blood.

It was fairly evident what had happened. But not why. Martita Delgado had come to Pfizer's studio for the night work, and had been followed. She had been murdered, and the assassins had left. Then, as an afterthought, they had forgotten to take the card with them. They had come back, but by then, Niles had called me, and had secreted the card. (It just had the *look* of strangeness and importance about it, so I could se why he would assume—as *I* had assumed—that it was what they had been after.) They had attacked Niles, and finally shot him with whatever it took to make that melty blue hole in a man, when he would not give them the card. Then I had showed. They had realized I had seen their faces, and so—I banged my elbow again when I thought of it . . .

They had turned to dust.

I tucked the card into my

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shirt pocket, and turned off the lights. I closed the door behind me, leaving the works—with my prints rubbed off the canvases, the doorknob and the light switch—for the cops to try and unravel.

If they could.

It was a long wait till the bars opened.

A long, chilly wait. But I had company.

The card.

And fear..

A straight rye that early in the morning was pure uncommon crap. It tasted like someone was painting my throat passages with napalm. I downed two, and gave the whole thing up as a bad bit. Finally, I piled back into the De Soto and tooled uptown to my pad. The bed was cold, but I got undressed and climbed into it again. I refused to think about the completely horrible and mad things that had happened to me in the space of a few hours.

I hit the sack and began slapping sixty. Ten minutes after my inflamed eyelids had closed and the battering-ram rattle the thug-dusts had left in my head had eased away, the phone rang again.

I ignored it the first eight rings, and pulled the covers over. The ninth ring did it. I sat up, and lit a cigarette. The phone rang ten and eleven. I took a long drag on the cigarette. Twelve, thirteen, fourteen. I finished the weed. Twenty-nine, thirty, thirty-one. I ground it out. The phone stopped, no thirty-six. I laid back down, and went to sleep.

I wasn't disturbed till almost ten o'clock.

Oh happy damned day!

But this time it was the Furies banging on my door. They had stuck a toothpick in the door buzzer, or had a thumb of particularly wonderous pushing power. Plus kicking. Plus banging. Plus yelling, like: "Open up! This is the police!"

So I calmly frantically wildly fast hopped out of the sack, and hit for the front door. I took off the chain and pulled the door open.

At ten in the morning, the face of Goldie Harper, Lieutenant of Homicide, Manhattan West, was nothing to see.

"Man, are you ugly," I said, and turned away.

Goldie came in, slammed the door behind me, and made directly for the kitchen. "What the hell is it *this* time, fuzz?" I snapped. "If it's business, you mooch no coffee from me."

"It's business," he snapped right back, "and I'll take the

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coffee anyhow. Unless you want to risk an 'assaulting an officer' charge." I sneered at him with my tongue, got myself all wet, and said to hell with it to myself. He made good coffee anyhow.

I splashed some cold water over my face and the back of my neck, reamed out my Sahara mouth with a dry toothbrush, and went back into the kitchen, barefooted, suddenly afraid Goldie was going to say something about Niles Pfizer.

"What do you know about Niles Pfizer," he started off.

It did just nicely to settle my stomach. Like hell.

He was measuring out the coffee for the top of the brewer, and all I could see was that wide, stooped back. His eyes would have told more—Goldie's always did—but he had them purposely averted. I did not know how much he had. Was he fishing, or did he know for certain?

"Niles Pfizer?" I asked. Surprisingly, my voice was steady and the words came effortlessly. "Why do you ask?"

Goldie clapped the lid on the coffee pot, turned up the gas, and put the bag of coffee back in the ice box. Then he looked at me over his shoulder and grunted.

"Uh-uh."

I looked back innocently. "Uh-uh what?"

"Uh-uh the bull. We know you were there. Probably between five-forty-five and seven o'clock this morning. And by the way—when you get a chance, take a look at that Adonis profile of yours; if I'd doubted you were anywhere this morning, that pan would tell me you were.

"What'd they hit you with? A Mack truck?"

I abruptly felt the pain in my face, where I'd been slugged by one of the thugs who was now dust. I could imagine what I looked like, but could not imagine how I'd avoided feeling the rawness before.

"I haven't any idea what the hell you're talking about, Goldie. And if you don't stop playing twenty questions with me, and tell me what the hell you want at this ungodly hour, I'll be forced to—"

"Crap!" he snorted, and turned away. He slid down into a kitchen chair, and thumbed his snapbrim back on his rugged old face. Goldie Harper was one of the veterans, one of the gas-house boys; he knew all there was to know about copping, and who was to be nabbed. He didn't fool easily.

"Okay," I conceded, sitting down beside him, "you tell me

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how you knew I'd been up there, and I'll give what I know. Fair exchange and all like that."

He screwed his thick lips into a grimace of annoyance.

I grinned engagingly at his big ugly puss.

"Simple, jerk," he snapped, "you left your prints all over that marble bust."

I didn't answer for a minute. How could I? I didn't know what the hell he was talking about. "*What* marble bust?"

He looked at me as though he was ashamed I'd asked such a question. "Come on, come on, come on, the bust on the model's stand. The one of the woman."

I hesitated again. Something was bad wrong. I remembered that apartment with all the nightmare clarity of an unusually sharp vision. There had been nothing on that model's stand but the blue-holed body of Martita Delgado, quite nude and quite cold. No bust at all.

I had to fake it.

"Oh, yeah, th—uh—*that* bust. I forgot for a minute I'd even touched it."

"What killed Pfizer?" he asked. Coldly.

Game time was over.

I gave him a trumped-up yarn about Pfizer being drunk and lonely and asking me to come over, and me going over and finding him dead, and going out to get drunk by myself. "I couldn't afford any trouble, having lost my license, Goldie," I finished up. "I knew you'd find him eventually anyhow without my help." Then I asked, tangentially, "How did you uncover him so fast?"

He got up to rescue the coffee that was about to boil over, and brought it back to the table. I got up and took down a pair of cups, some sugar and cream, as he was speaking. "A cleaning woman comes in every morning, very early, to straighten up the mess from the night before. It seems your Pfizer was a ladies' man if ever there lived one. Today the old lady came in and saw him there. You know what killed him?"

The question took me off-guard. I stammered, and he filled in the gap. "No? Well, we don't either. So rest easy."

Since he didn't seem to think I was guilty of anything —at least, that was certainly the way he was *acting*—I decided to go along with him. For some reason I had no intention of telling him about that card, or the two strange things that had occurred up in

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Niles Pfizer's apartment: the thugs turning to dust, and the blue glow of the hole drilled through the photographer. But it was obvious he had discovered the body *after* someone had removed Miss Martita Delgado and her ventilated torso, and substituted a marble bust loaded with my fingerprints.

After all the weirdies I had been tossed since last night, I didn't even stop to wonder how they had gotten my prints on the bust. They had done it as easily as they had turned to dust, and that seemed to be that. But—

"I didn't examine him too closely, Goldie, but that wound in his stomach looked pretty odd."

Harper fitted his wide, blocky hands around the coffee cup, till the fingertips interlaced, and looked up over the lip of the cup at me. His eyes were readable as hell. He did not suspect me, but he wanted to know what I knew. *Not a chance of that, Goldie,* I thought. I had to take care of most of this thing myself . . . because of the way Niles had died, and because he had told me about it before he'd conked. And besides, if one man had been brutally murdered just for being *near* the scene of those thugs' operations, what might they do to Goldie if he started making things hot for them, as I knew he would if I told him what I knew.

Then I wondered for an instant what they'd do to *me?*

"Odd? Yeah, I suppose you could call a hole that goes clean through skin and bone and cartilage neat as a pinking shears, and leaves the edges of the wound glassy, odd. I suppose you could. If you was an ass.

"But you aren't an ass, Ray. You're an ex-shamus, and that makes a difference. You aren't used to hitting a deal like this without noticing more than you've told me."

"You think I killed him, Goldie?"

He stared at me levelly, and for a minute I thought he'd answer in the affirmative, just to be a rat. But after a bit he shook his head. "No. I'll accept your story about the call and such. But I know dawned well you're holding out on me. And if you are, Ray, I can make it hot for you."

I shrugged. "Look, Goldie, they took away my ticket because I said the wrong things in print about a city hall bigwig, which are still true—"

He cut in, "—which are still libelous till proved otherwise."

"Okay, okay, till proved

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otherwise. But just the same, I'm without status, just a private solitary citizen, and you can't touch me."

"Take the law into your own hands and I'll touch you so hard you'll think the battleship *Missouri* hit you."

"Don't let's get melodramatic, Goldie," I chuckled. "Pfizer was an acquaintance, not a buddy. I went to a couple of his crazy parties and I drank a few beers with him once when he wanted some work done. That was all. We were on first name terms, but I won't put myself in a position to develop a big hole in the tummy like his, just in the sainted name of Niles Pfizer's ghost."

Harper pushed away from the table, and got up. "Okay. The department'll want a statement from you later, so don't develop any illnesses that need faraway climates to cure. We really haven't got anything, but since we know you were there at any rate, you're still suspect number one. Not a very impressive number one, true, but the only one we've got." He walked toward the living room. I followed him.

As he opened the door to leave, I asked, "Goldie, what do you know about a Martita Delgado. Modelled for Pfizer once in a while."

"Modelled last night, maybe?"

"I asked a simple question. Don't start weaving skeins."

"Never heard of her. Anything to check?"

I nodded. "Yeah, maybe. Maybe you ought to find out where she is. Might help you —and me."

He pursed his thick lips, nodded, and left.

I sat down to think. I was having trouble sorting the real from the fantastic. The affairs of the night before had been compounded, and had involved me all the more, by the apparent disappearance of Martita Delgado, and the in-place-of-her appearance of a marble bust—loaded with sticky prints of one Raymond Francis Lunch, ex-private eye. Me.

So someone had had it hit the apartment after I left, and before Goldie and his hup-squad arrived. That meant I was probably seen leaving—strictly assumption, but I was willing to let it ride as real stuff—and most likely was under surveillance now.

I went to the window and looked out through a corner of the bamboo blinds. The street was full of people as per usual, and no way of telling if

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any of them were watching my pad.

I saw one character who was a dead-ringer for Abe Lincoln, standing by the mail box, reading the pick-up time card, and he was taking a long time, but there was no way to peg him as an observer. Oh, what the hell, I was just getting edgy . . .

He straightened up and looked me dead in the eye.

I let the blind slip back, and found a trickle of sweat was coursing its way to my spine's end. This was no peanuts deal, whatever was behind it. An outfit that used a weapon like the blue-blowholer, and could turn its men into tidy puffs of dust—and who had more than four men in the organization to begin with—was nothing to toy with.

But there didn't seem to be anything I could do right then. I was being watched, and I didn't know where to start working, in any event. I went in to get dressed; the card was in my inside jacket pocket. I took it out and looked at it again.

Freidl, 6682 Riverside Drive, GR 2-7390.

I didn't read the block print on the other side. I already knew what it said, and there was a certain creepy feeling I got every time I thought of the Children of Chaos, whoever or whatever the hell *they* were. And that tagline about the sins of their fathers being heritage, made my flesh shimmy. I was almost afraid to shrug into a jacket, and open the bottom drawer of my bedroom dresser. Afraid, because in that drawer, wrapped in a sealed plastic gun-bag, I had my .32 police special, and I knew if I ripped off the top of that bag, I'd take the revolver, and if I took the revolver, I'd sure as hell go out to find these Children of Chaos, and get them to tell me why and how they'd killed Niles Pfizer and the model. And why they'd tried to frame me.

I wasn't mad, just curious. In a sort of unhealthy, detached way. But I was scared, too —and how.

I ripped off the top of the plastic gun-bag.

It was easy shaking Abe Lincoln.

All I had to do was go out the kitchen window, onto the fire escape, and down it till I reached the level of a hall window in the building facing on the next street, its rear to the rear of my building. I paid token respect to my tail by surveying the alley between buildings, before I slid up the

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window and crawled through. Nothing.

I hoisted through and walked down the stairs to the street. It was empty of observers, being one block away, and I hailed a cab from the corner. I gave the cabbie the address, and settled back, willing myself to a non-thinking state, as the hack pulled out into traffic and moved on.

I had the cabbie circle the block twice, when I got up to 6682 Riverside Drive. I took a close look at the building. It was one of those architectural non-entities built in the Thirties, when no one was quite certain what was *chic* and what was *gauche*. Big and only slightly juicy-fruited with scrollwork and knobs on the ledges, it looked gray and clean and solid, as though it had recently been steam-blasted.

Finally, after the cabbie asked me where the hell I thought I was, on a merry-go-round or something, I got out and paid him. I snapped my fingers when I remembered I hadn't checked into the office of the door-to-door brush company I worked for, and made a mental note to call in to tell them I'd be sick for a week or so. Just playing it safe in the eventuality I didn't get killed myself, and might need a job when I got back to the real world.

I went into the lobby of the building, and stepped past the doorman as though I knew what I was doing, and where I was going. But he had me out-foxed. There were buzzers for each apartment, all right, but the name-plates were empty. I'd have to ask the doorman, or take potluck, ringing half a hundred doorbells till I found the right one.

"Freidl?" I asked him, because he was still staring at me with open curiosity. I did not say Mr. or Miss or Mrs. Freidl, because I hadn't the faintest idea which it might be.

"Can I help you, sir?"

I gawked. The way he said it, I knew for a certainty *he* was Freidl. It was just that way of answering. And I could not stop myself as I asked him: "You're Freidl?"

"That's right, sir." His tones were becoming more curious, more intrigued. Who was this guy, and what did he want? "May I help you?"

I didn't know what the hell to say to him, and half turned away to look for a quick reply elsewhere. Then I noticed the outside phone hung beside the nameplates and buzzrs. The phone anyone who would want

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to reach Freidl during working hours would have to use. It was GR 2-6800. For a split-instant it didn't register, then it did all at once. GRamercy 2-7390 was the number of the Freidl I was after. So that meant that either this doorman lived in the building himself, which was a coincidence I wouldn't even consider, or there was yet another Freidl at this address.

Covering quickly, I said, "Did a Mr. Brown leave a package for me here. I spoke to him this morning, and he said he would leave it with you. My name is Furman. Do you have a package for me? A manila envelope with—"

He cut me off. "Mr. Brown is away for the week, sir. Are you certain you have the right apartment building?" I had taken a stab at the name Brown, figuring there had to be at least one Brown out of fifty apartments.

"Certainly this is the right place. I knew your name, didn't I?" He was a big man, all shoulders and chest and hard gray eyes.

"Yes, sir," he answered enigmatically, "you *did* know my name."

"Well, then?"

"No, sir, Mr. Brown left no package with me. I'll ring him up if you choose."

"No, that's all right," I backed out of it gracefully. "He must have left before he remembered the package. Well, never mind. Thanks, anyhow." I walked out of there, feeling the doorman's eyes boring two tiny holes in my back.

Once outside, I went around the block, making sure he wasn't trailing me, and found the basement entrance to the building. I went down the stairs, and was in luck. The gate that led through into the rear courtyard and the basement, was open. I saw bits of coal in the court, and figured the coal truck had been here recently, which was why the gate was still open.

I went through, and walked across to the basement door. It, too, stood open and I walked through.

It was dim in the basement, and I found myself in a hallway. Several doors opened on either side, and printed across them were FURNACE ROOM, CUSTODIAN, LAUNDRY ROOM and TRASH ROOM. I tried each door, except the custodian's, and they were all open, revealing inside just what the title outside had indicated. I tried the custodian's door. It swung open as I touched the knob. For a second I hesitated, then remem-

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bered how the janitor in my own building was constantly out repairing things, and when he thought he would be gone for a short time only, left his own door unlocked. To be certain, I rang the bell. No one answered.

I went inside and closed the door behind me. A quick search of the place revealed what I'd been hoping to find. A duplicate of the buzzer-board in the lobby. Except this one was the tenant's contact with the janitor, and the name plates had not been removed.

I scanned the board quickly. There it was. *6F*. The name was the same, Freidl. After an ear-pressed second against the outer door, I opened up and looked out warily. The way was clear. I stepped out and closed the janitor's door behind me. The elevator stood across the hallway. I pressed the button and a minute later was riding up to the sixth floor. There are more ways to skin a cat than are dreamt of in your philosophy, Horatio—

6F was one of six staring doors. Staring, for each door had a peephole of one-way glass in it. I stopped and gnawed on my lower lip a while. There were several things I'd not bothered to consider, particularly about the Gargantua named Freidl in the front lobby. It was too damned much coincidence that his name would be the same as that of the person I sought. So there were three possible explanations that rang true. Three possible answers.

One, that he lived upstairs here, either alone or with others of the Children. In that case, the man downstairs was a plant, a front, a guard, and he knew I was after something. That automatically made him a member of the Children of Chaos.

Two, that he had been warned someone might be around looking for this Freidl, and had assumed the name to all strangers asking. The same held true for two as it did for one, in that case, that he was a member of the Children of Chaos.

Third, this was a trap.

I found the last difficult to believe, for no one had known I was coming here. Whoever had gone back to get that card from the body of Martita Delgado, had more than likely *not known* what she had scribbled on the back of it. They had been after the card itself, for nothing else had been touched in the apartment, but I was stumped to know how they could tell the name Freidl was written on the reverse side,

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and consequently that I would be coming here in search.

Then I remembered the marble bust with my prints on it, and I realized that someone else had seen my face, and had undoubtedly sent a description of me to anyone who had need for such an outline. So if Big Boy downstairs was one of the Kids—I was mentally referring to the Children of Chaos in that way already—he knew who I was before I opened my yap. Which made number three very, very valid.

He would know I'd get suspicious, and try to get into the building to find the real Freidl. At that point the coincidence of the three unlocked doors struck me between the shoulder-blades.

I've been selling brushes in apartment buildings for nearly a year, since I lost my license, and I'd yet to see three doors so uncommonly unlocked. What I had thought was logical reasons for their unlockedness—the coal truck, the janitor being off repairing—suddenly seemed pallid. Hell, yes, this was a trap.

I wanted to leave right then.

But I knew I'd have to find some answers pretty chop-chop, or give the whole thing up as a failure on my part. The dying faces of Niles Pfizer was behind my eyes, though, and it wouldn't let me give up. I knew I was a diamond-encrusted ass, but I rang the bell.

I heard the little plate on the other side of the peephole slip up with a soft metallic sound, and knew an eye was glued to the glass, watching me. I'd know in a second if I'd been trapped or outfoxed, or if I'd stumbled on the first link in the chain that would finally wind up by telling me who the Children of Chaos were.

The door opened a sliver on its chain, and a quarter of a head peered around at me.

"Yes?" the quarter asked peremptorily.

"Uh, Freidl?" I asked.

"Do you have an appointment for a reading?" the quarter asked.

Hell, I reasoned. If that was the only way the door would get open, then, "Yes, certainly, I have an appointment."

The chain rattled, the door shut, the chain rattled some more and was slipped off, then the door opened fully. Until then I had half-assumed Freidl was a man. I was wrong.

Freidl was about the sexiest hunk of wench I'd ever ogled. She was a redhead, but not flashy. Auburn with little highlights of bronze and

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brown in the red. I couldn't tell what her eyes held, but they were gleaming and honest-looking, her brow was straight and unfurrowed, and she had the cutest little upturned nose I'd ever seen. Her body I couldn't say much about, because she was swathed from neck to feet in a long, shapeless gown completely covered with half moons, stars, abstract astrology symbols, and little portentious signs of the zodiac. I'd hit a star-gazer's joint..

Once inside, and the door locked and chained, my blood started singing in my veins. The song was "Let's Get Away From It All!"

The apartment was decorated the same fashion as her dress. The living room was suffused with a dull rosy glow, from concealed lights that cast heavy shadows across the low ceiling. The blinds were drawn, and appeared to have been drawn since before I was born. An ornate inlaid tile table sat squarely in the center of the living room, squarely in the center of a hand-woven rug with a curious mushroom-shaped design on it. Around the table were four chairs. The room was three-deep in knick-knacks, all of them either of astrological origin, or of Oriental tone.

There were a few crazy things there, too.

A Buddha with its head smashed and a lily in its placid lap dominated one far corner.

A huge vase that rose nearly to the ceiling was filled with what appeared to he mucky, swamp water.

A brace of dueling pistols with ramrods stopping up their barrels hung on one wall, while beneath them, a bared pair of dirks glistened brightly, as though their blades had been rubbed with crimson.

Freidl preceded me into the room, all of which I observed in the space of a few seconds. It was not the sort of room to escape attention.

She moved two of the chairs away from the table, went to a cupboard-like highboy against the far wall, and took out an elaborate, gold-trimmed crystal ball. She sat down with it before her, and nodded me to the seat across.

I sat down and watched her from cautious eyes. She really was a remarkably attractive woman. I would have placed her age at something between twenty-nine and thirty-two. I still could not discern the outlines of what I assumed to be a particularly lush figure, beneath the baggy folds of the seer's gown.

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"You have come to me for a reading by whose recommendation?" she asked warily. "I see no record of your appointment in my files."

I didn't quite know what to answer, because since I'd come in, she hadn't consulted any files. Was she getting that hokum from the crystal, or had she merely figured out I was an impostor . . . ? I thought of Freidl No. 1 downstairs. It didn't really matter what his reasons had been for telling me he was Freidl. If he was or if he wasn't, it was a cinch now that he was connected here in some way.

He'd have to be. No one could forget they had someone like this living on the sixth floor.

"Well, I'm, uh, I came to you through a friend," I said heartily, stalling.

"What friend?" she asked, inexorably.

"Uh, well, you may know him under a different name. . . you see, he's quite well known in the business world, and though there's absolutely nothing wrong with coming to an astrologer, he might find it prudent to give you another name."

"What is his name?" she asked again, undeterred.

I dreamed it up fast. "Charles Bowen?" I'm afraid I had a querulous twitch on the end of it, but she shook her head anyway.

"No such man ever came to me for guidance."

I fished in my side pocket and came up with a fin. I laid it out on the table and said, "Well, in any case, I need a reading most desperately, and I'm willing to pay for—"

She snorted and shoved the fiver back with one finger. She looked at it as though it were Confederate. I assumed she got a lot more than that for a reading.

"I will read you free of charge, Mr. Lunch."

Her smile was deadly, and my face must have whitened out, at mention of my name. She smiled sphynx-like again, and leaned over the crystal.

Her voice deepened beautifully, and she began to intone as though from a vault: "I see a great deal of unhappiness for you, Mr. Lunch. Much, much unhappiness. I see a dead man, and a dead woman, and a marble bust which many in uniform cluck over. I see you fleeing, and I see the mushroom-shaped sign that invisibly rests on your forehead . . ."

I fingered my forehead unknowingly, somehow caught up in her rhetoric. She was

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scaring the pants off me, and I think she knew it. But I still had to listen. This mushroom-shaped bit for instance was a new factor. Perhaps there was a factor of explanation for the deaths of Niles and the Delgado girl in what she was about to say.

"I see a group planning, striving, fighting silently to bring life and light to the world. I see a group who have been terribly wronged. A group whose father's sins are their heritage—"

Bingo! She was still talking, telling about his group that was secretly planning to do some crazy thing or other when everybody else was asleep or had their backs turned or somesuch, but I wasn't really listening. She had spouted the same phrase I'd read on that card, as if by rote.

"What do you know about Martita Delgado?" I interrupted.

Her face came up, and the expression was not what I was expecting. If I'd expected her to be startled, she was far from it. That strange grin skimmed across her sensuous lips, and she spat one word, "Karlo!"

I saw a reflection in the crystal, and started to turn just as Big Boy, Freidl No. 1, came at me with one of his white gloves full of coins. I tried to slip sidewise in the chair to escape the blow I could almost feel, but she had had it planned out so damn neat.

The chair had arms. The chair was right up next to the table.

I started to rise, and he hit me across the left cheekbone. The pain paralyzed me all the way down my left side, and I thought sure my face had been split open. I got to my feet somehow, and he hit me again, right behind the ear whammo! I fell forward and started to slip to the floor . . .

I reached out with numbed fingers and my hand tangled in the billowing flow of Freidl's gown.

I don't know what happened after I hit the floor, because I was cold-decked properly, but this I do remember; I heard cloth ripping as I fell past her, and as I slammed into the floor I turned over and got a look at her.

The gown had come away down the front, completely, and I saw what her body looked like.

Beautiful. Neatly and voluptuously-proportioned . . .

. . . and completely covered by a fine down of light blue feathers . . .

I was out like a light.

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Man, the hammock was rocking too hard! I was hanging head-down, my arms dangling and swinging loosely, a pressure across the small of my back and something hard in my stomach. My legs were bent down and held against a flat hard surface, and I rocked to and fro. I came awake slowly, with pain, pain, pain, brother, and realized I'd been tossed unceremoniously over someone's broad shoulder.

I tried to twist my head, and caught a bit of a view. A doorman's uniform. I was over Karlo's shoulder, the big ape's fanny. What could I do? I was weak as a three-day-old martini, and my head felt as though someone had played Beat the Cluck with it. I wished most fervently to go hippity-hop back to my miserable existence as a brush salesman. Being bitten by dogs, getting doors slammed on my foot, having housewives slap me and husbands snarl at me, was nothing compared to fooling with these Children of Chaos.

These kids wanted to kill me!

I hung there, head-down, feeling the blood trip-hammering in my temples, and closed my eyes.

We were going down a long flight of stairs. Very long. Much longer than the flights between floors of Freidle's building. In fact, now that I took a deep whiff, it smelled like the crypt, and damp, and musty.

We kept going down, him walking, me swinging limp and helpless.

Finally I figured I'd had enough. I didn't know what was happening, or where he was intending to take me, but I had a good hunch that the reason I'd been slugged and not killed was that somewhere in my cute curly head I had some info they wanted. Perhaps they suspected I'd talked to Goldie Harper—I was certain now I'd been under their surveillance by the Children since I'd left Pfizer's place—and were going to brain-wash me into telling them what I'd said.

Nuff was nuff. I'd had the course. Framed, beaten, slugged unconscious, this was all of it. I arched my back and kicked out with my legs. I'm not a small man, and I caught that slob right in the crotch. He screamed so loud I thought I was going to be deafened by the echoes that hit up at us from down below. He stumbled against the side of the stairs, and my aching head hit a slippery-wet wall. He stumbled again, down a few stair-levels, and I was able to

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toss myself off his shoulder, in front of him.

I hauled back, thinking one solid punch would settle *his* hassenpfeffer, and let it slide out to tag him alongside the jaw.

I must have broken every finger on my left hand. I had heard about glass jaws, iron jaws and granite jaws. But this guy's kisser was composed of solid, 100% molybdenum steel, coated with impregnable, unshatterable, solid diamond. My arm got news of the pain first, and in a second my entire body was quivering, literally quivering with it. He just stumbled about screeching and clutching himself, while I pressed my lips together trying not to join him in the scream-fest.

Kicking had seemed to go the best, so as soon as I got back a little of my control, I kicked him again, as hard as I could. Again in the same spot. This time he just fell backward, and disappeared from sight.

I heard a scream descending, and then he hit. With a bam. I abruptly realized the stair had had a wall on only one side, and the other was open to a great darkness that fell away below the winding staircase. Like in an old haunted castle, I thought to myself crazily.

Then I started down the stairs at my own pace, full of pain and my gorge rapidly becoming buoyant. More than once I was forced to stop and lean against that cool, slippery wall, my hand to my forehead, the steps whirling beneath me like a hungry vortex. But I kept on down, and it was a long way to go.

The bottom came suddenly, and I looked around for Karlo's body. I found some of it after a while. But one thing about it scared hell out of me. His body was totally gone. Pulped and in slimey runners across the wall and stone flaggings of the floor. But his head lay there staring sightlessly at the ebony vastness overhead, completely undamaged. I don't mean it was attached and unbruised. I mean it was as though his body had been soft and vulnerable, and the head had been constructed from steel, and just set atop the flab body.

For it was cut cleanly at the base of the neck. No broken skin, no open wound, no smashed bone and ripped tissue. Just broken, as a brittle candy bar would be broken.

And staring up at nothing, with dead eyes.

I stooped and touched the

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head. It was cold as a steel wall in an Eskimo's summer house. Frozen and dead, Karlo was more terrifying than when alive.

These Children of Chaos were not only deadly, they were freaks.

And that was what started the idea buzzing in my head. That, and the phrase they had used about sins of the fathers. I put it out of my thoughts, and struck out ahead. I hadn't the faintest idea how long I'd been unconscious, or where I was now. Logic told me I must be near Freidl's building, and a bit of assumption reassured me that I was far underground. Ergo almost, I was under Freidl's building. Way beneath.

I wished to hell right then that I'd brought along a flashlight. I patted myself down to see if I'd brought my cigarette lighter, but if I had, it was lost when I'd been thrown over Karlo's shoulder and joggled down those stairs. The only thing I had on me was the .32 Police Special, and for the life of me I couldn't figure why they hadn't taken it off me when I'd been cold. Perhaps because they wanted me out of the way fast. Who knows? At any rate, I had the revolver, and took it out now, holding it tightly, ahead of me, as if it would remove any obstacles in the deepening darkness. Light had filtered down from somewhere above—not much light, but enough to grope my way—but as I passed out of the filtering less-dark, I found myself wandering down a stone corridor, completely dark and stifling.

I remembered something then, and opened my jacket. I felt for the hidden flap inside the right tail of my jacket, and felt the rigid card still safely hidden there. I closed up my jacket again, because it was chilly in that corridor, and kept walking.

A lot of nothing was down there. For a while.

I was walking, and the gun was out ahead of me, when abruptly, the muzzle went clank and hit something solid. I felt ahead of me, and it was a stone wall, just like the sides of the corridor had been. This wall covered the mouth of the tunnel. I felt along it, and there were no openings, no protruberances, nothing. I was cold against it, and finally gave it a healthy shove. Nothing. It wouldn't budge. Solid as a Krupa paradiddle.

I settled back against the wall, with my badly aching arm held away, and my gun tipped toward the floor. I was

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stumped. It was a good two miles back along the corridor and up those stairs. And whatever entrance was at the top of those stairs, was more than likely locked, as this wall was a lock. I was starting to feel real sorry for myself, when I heard a growing whine, right behind me. I put my ear to the cool wall, and it wasn't so cool. It was warm in fact.

The whine was behind it.

That started me running back the way I had come. I trotted back a few dozen yards, and lay flat on the stone flagging.

The whine increased till it was good and loud, and then the rock wall slid up into the ceiling. Just like that. Light spilled out from behind it, and I saw three people standing inside, in a small room. A room? No, not quite. It was an elevator of sorts. There were controls, and as they stepped off the slightly raised platform, they turned to the left wall. Two of them were men, and third was a horsey-looking woman of perhaps forty-five. She walked oddly, with a sort of surging, willowing movement, as though her legs were made of licorice sticks soft from the sun. One of the men wore a dark felt hat, pulled so low over his face I could not see his eyes, and he wore heavy gloves, though the day was warm, and they did not match in any way what he had on. The third man was as plain and typical as any pedestrian on the street.

The pedestrian tapped the left-side wall in three places which I noted, and at the third tap a section of wall slid back, showering another band of light that crossed the one from the elevator. As they all three filed in, I rose silently and moved along the wall opposite, hugging it and methodically watching for signs of activity from the hole in the wall.

I started violently as the wall slid back into place, and was sent back into darkness as the elevator disappeared simultaneously. The light was cut off when the stone wall slid down into place, and I had to feel for the section of left-side wall without aid of light.

Finally, I found it, and ran my hand over the surface. There were three indentations where it had been tapped, and I repeated the procedure I had seen the pedestrian undergo, in the same exact way. The wall slid back for me. I stood in light, and for an instant shivered, thinking I might be clearly limned, for anyone inside to see. But the light was overhead, and the hundreds or

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so people assembled in the huge, mirror-walled auditorium, all had their backs to me. They were seated in modern chairs, in rows, staring up at a platform upon which stood an even *more* modernistic podium.

Behind the podium stood Freidl, her pastel-blue featherhide rustling in a breeze from somewhere. It was not as chilly in the auditorium, and I saw that many of the people had their jackets off, or their coats open.

None of them were normal.

I realized abruptly that the idea I'd had churning within me, coupled with their slogan —sins of our fathers, our heritage—had been quite correct. Everyone there was malformed in some way. Even those who seemed completely natural, gave off a *feeling* of strangeness. They seemed alien, and yet I knew they were human beings.

There was a man with a small head growing from his neck, just under the chin of his natural head. He was conversing softly with the midget head.

A woman in the last row had loosened her dress, and a long, spikey tail lay curled behind her chair, on the floor. Every now and then it twitched spastically.

I saw a one-eyed man. One eye in the center of his forehead. He was sitting on the far left and his three-quarter profile was sufficient to label him a cyclops. I took note that he was one of the three who had just entered; that was the reason he wore his hat so far down over his face—to cover his strange eye.

One woman, far up front, was listening to a beanpole man beside her. His neck was of giraffe-proportions, and he leaned and bent to speak to her. A high-pitched, almost birdlike whistle emanated from her, and she rose straight up from her seat, by beating atrophied wings instead of arms. She settled heavily, the mirth dying from her face, and the stunted wings flapped slowly to her sides. I looked away from them, they were all hideous.

Sins of the fathers—

Mutants.

These, indeed, were the Children of Chaos. The offspring of radiation, of holocaust, of eternity gone berserk. I was torn between two feelings: pity for them in their infirmity, and revulsion at the sight of them. I remembered Karlo, and his jelly body, his steel head; I remembered the three thugs, who had turned to dust; I looked up at

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Freidl, magnificent in her softly blue wrapper of feathers.

And I wondered how Martita Delgado, who had been absolutely normal, had gotten in with them.

I slipped behind a pillar that shored up the mirrored ceiling, and strained to catch snatches of conversation from down front. Finally, Freidl banged a gavel, and looking like some sort of bizarre clubwoman calling attention, began the meeting. The Children of Chaos were called to order.

"Have we a report from the Agitation Group?" she asked, as an opener. A tall man with arms like ropes stood up, his hairy hawser-appendages swaying freely, and smiled at her.

He must have smiled—she smiled back. She was indeed quite beautiful.

"We have, through one of our membership in Congress, introduced an alarm bill, dealing with fallout. It is sure to be defeated, but the national weeklies and the press will unquestionably pick it up, and the publicity will be widespread. In addition, we have begun a series of riots in Calcutta, Bombay, New Delhi and seven other large Indian cities. Grain riots. We have taken the precaution of contaminating select doles of this grain, to foment even more unrest."

He handed up a manila folder with a sheaf of notes in it. "A complete report," he explained. He sat down, the tentacle arms swinging lithely.

"Good," she spoke to herself, and lay the folder down on the podium.

A woman with hair like a patchwork quilt rose. Her unruly mop of orange, green, blue, pink and red fluttered about her head like Angel's Hair. She started to speak, but Freidl cut her off.

"We'll have the report of your Assassination Group later, Sylvia, but right now we have something much more important at hand."

She clapped her hands, and two white-jacketed men — as abnormal as the others, with their humped backs and spined heads partially concealed by the jackets—came onto the platform from an alcove to the right. Bearing between them a tall panel of levers and knife-switches, they staggered, slightly making the stairs.

They set the panel down, and immediately set to work untangling the leads and thick bales of wires that ran from the rear of the panel to attachments and sockets at the far right, near the edge of the alcove. In a few moments they

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had completed their work, and left by the same route they had come.

Freidl looked at the panel for a long series of moments, then walked back to the podium. She stared down at her audience of malformed admirers, and began speaking lowly, with stark intensity, and a sense of importance—as though history was in her speech, as though history were about to be made.

"None of you here need be told that this is a day for which we have worked and suffered, for many years. None of you need be told this, yet many of you have shown alarm at the publicity and pressure that has come about due to the—ah—removal of Member Delgado."

A heavy-throated rumble stirred through the auditorium at that, and Freidl raised one downy-feathered arm to still the murmur.

"Any one of you knows the secrecy with which we have had to restrict ourselves. No one of us had it any easier than anyone else. The world that gave us birth would destroy us in a moment if they knew we existed. So we have had to hide ourselves.

"Member Delgado was a traitor! She was prepared to turn us over to the authorities, in exchange for leniency for herself." Then as almost an aside, with revulsion stinging in her words, she added, "But then, she was hardly one of us at all. Seven toes to a foot hardly qualified her to become a member of the Children of Chaos."

I stood there digging all this stuff, and thinking My God what a fantastic thing has been going on right under all our noses. How these strange people had been born—was it *all* as a result of the A-bomb explosions, or was this some after-effect of radiation poisoning; was there a fallout factor working in the air we knew nothing about? I listened to it all, and the .32 Police Special grew warm and sticky in my hand. What a den of hell *this* place was!

"There was no need to use the Polarizer on her! She was still one of us, a Member!" a tiny, thimble-sized man astride a no-eared woman's shoulder bellowed in a voice far too large for his size. "It has frightened Members almost everywhere. Why, I've had cables from Ankara and Buenos Aires that are—"

Freidl cut him off peremptorily, with a mash of her palm on the podium. "Good! Excellent! Fear, that is more

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of what we need. We need more fear in each of us, for with that fear in *us*, when the time comes, we will more easily be able to convey that fear to the Normals!" She spat the last word out as though it were a chunk of ripe persimmon. I stared at her face, all the way acros the auditorium. Man, she was a fanatic if there ever breathed one. She was hell-bent on something or other, and with the minutes, I was getting a better idea of what it was.

Without half-trying I knew damned well I was a Normal.

And Miss Freidl did not in any way, shape or form dig Normals.

I had to be Normal. I only had one head and ten toes—properly arranged.

"Our organization is dedicated to the overthrow of Man," she intoned, as though the words were engraved in fire on the inside of her skull. "From the ashes and rubble of this world we will rebuild in our own time and our own way. But this Normal world must die, or we will never be free; free from hiding and free from covering ourselves so that we, too, seem to be Normals."

I thought about that for a second. What a kid with guts that Martita Delgado would have had to have been. To pose for photographs, with the seven-toe deformity she sported. I was betting no one would ever find a photo of her in her barefeet, though.

"Our campaign has suffered during the past ten years," she went on doggedly, "for though we have had the benefits of more advanced scientific thinking—the effects struck their inventors first, in many cases—we have had to hide and wait and plan in secret.

"But all that is past. Tonight we are at the point of no return. Future historians will speak of this night . . . the night of no return. For Man, and for his Children . . ."

"But Martita was—" the tiny man bellowed anew.

"Martita Delgado was a traitor! She deserved to die! And anyone harboring her sentiments will feel the heat of the Polarizer," she swung her arm out, and it pointed directly toward the furthest alcove in my sight. I edged out just slightly, and took a look. There were three hawk-nosed men back there—and I mean they had noses would have made a real winged hawk blush—and they were holding weapons with bell-muzzles and coils on them that made the

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damned things look dangerous. I assumed correctly that these were the Polarizers, and that they were the weapons that had eaten a glowing blue hole through Martita Delgado's pretty head, and Niles Pfizer's belly. What the three thugs had done with the one they had used—the thugs who had turned to dust—I did not know, unless they could turn other things to dust, as easily as themselves. But though they were kamikaze troops of the Children's army, those dust-thugs, I could see no reason why they wouldn't dust me, instead of themselves. So something else must have happened to the Polarizer they had had with them.

There were a lot of little scrappy pieces to this thing that didn't fit, that were left hanging. Perhaps I'd never know the answers to them, because this was a helluva big picture I was trying to see, and there were things that had happened that might never come to light.

But I knew I had to hear what she was saying; and snapped my atetntion back to the podium.

"So a few of you knew her! So you wish to put the petty affections and attachments of your Normal guises above your true purposes! Well, after tonight, none of you will worry about the Martita Delgados in our midst. You will stamp them out as ruthlessly as you will kill all Normals.

"Tonight the Children of Chaos rule the world!"

She stepped back to the panel, and her hand went to one knife-switch painted a blood-red. Her feathered fingers rested on the switch, and her eyes glowed with the most ungodly light I've ever seen.

Man, my blood started backing up.

"This switch controls the first of our Polarizer bombs. Few of you have known of this project. So secret was it, that only the men who conceived it, and the few of us in the top echelons of the Children of Chaos were aware of its existence. Over a thousand bombs have been laid during the past year and a half. In every major city, army emplacement, strategic railhead, air center and vital position in the world, a Polarizer bomb rests, waiting merely for *this . . . !*"

Her hand tightened on the switch, and as though the flesh and steel were one, she slammed it home. I heard a sizzle, and a rumble, and then the very earth beneath and above and around us shivered and trembled.

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Then through the ground I heard the most terrible squeal of earthly agony imaginable.

I wasn't there, I was below ground, but I've seen News of the Day newsreels of it, and to say it was horrible would be the mass understatement of the century. That bombsite was ripped loose from the Earth. The bomb had been planted far downtown in New York City, in the one spot that could cripple America most effectively.

When she pulled that switch, the miles-wide area of the financial section of Manhattan, went sky-high. It rose up as though on a pillar, with everything staying together for an instant, as that column of earth rose straight up. The city shimmered and wallowed in panic as the financial district went up, up, up, and then exploded. The buildings split at the seams, and the bricks and steel parted. The entire section went ka-bloom, and people and metal and glass and everything that was, went every which way. It rained down over New York for the better part of fifteen minutes; rained down into the two-mile deep crater the explosion had caused.

I knew none of that at the time, for I was still intent on the sounds around me and the hellfire look in Freidl's eyes.

But later I saw it, and knew that my emotions as it had happened, were accurate. It was a ghastly debacle. Thousands died without a chance. The buildings were miles in the air when they exploded, and anyone living through the explosion itself, would have fallen too far and hit too damned hard to get up and walk away.

No one came out of it alive.

I saw Freidl move her hand to still another knife-switch, and so help me, Hannah, I didn't know what I was doing, but I was racing down one of the aisles toward her, with that puny revolver stuck straight out in front of me, and I let loose with three shots.

One, two, three . . .

And all three missed her cleanly.

One hit the panel, and went right through. A second spanged off the wall behind her flattening out and clinking away on the floor. The third one. I didn't even see go awry.

I got her with the fourth one.

I hit the platform and went right up over it on all fours. I came almost erect, and fired from the hip. The bullet took

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her right in the forehead, and spun her around counter-clockwise. She started spilling blood and clutching at her beloved panel, and fell over, carrying it with her.

Then I felt a sizzle go over my right shoulder, and from the corner of my eye I saw the blue blotching bolt of one of those Polarizers as it fired dead-away at me. I dove for the desk, rolled, and came up running again. I snapped off a shot fast, and there was only one guy more surprised than me where it went:

That was the hawk-nosed guy it hit.

He caught the slug high up in the neck—hell, I'd aimed for the belly—and fell back against his two buddies. They were a wild tangle of arms, legs and bird-beaks for a few seconds, and that gave me just the time to do a Red Grange and land in the middle of them. The hit boy was still thrashing about, making life miserable for the other two, and one of them inadvertently pressed the stud or trigger or whateverthehell the Polarizer had, and another blue flash went up through the mirrored ceiling.

Glass came splintered down among the already panicky audience, and they started to bolt. That only made things the more frantic. Jolly-O! I came up out of the puddle of mutants with one of the Polarizers, and turned it on them.

What a glassy mess. It took two bursts. Clean through, and ruined the floor of the alcove, to boot.

With the side-boys out of the way, I turned back to the main auditorium, and swivelled the Polarizer on the rest of them. It was a long, tube-like weapon, with a button at the rear, easy to press, while I held the pistol-grip stock and the bracing rod up front. Somehow, I didn't have the heart to shoot down those poor winged, double-headed, scaley, twittering monstrosities — even though I knew what they had just done to part of my town, and what they intended to do to my entire race.

I couldn't shoot them; I felt sorry for the poor ugly specimens of humanity. I fired over their heads. It would have been easier if I'd just shot into their midst; not so many would have died.

Because I hit one of the pillars supporting that mirror roof, and the middle of the pillar just went poof, and was gone. The ceiling started to crack, and the cracks ran across the glass, and a second later there were about a million and a half deadly sharp

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slivers of glass falling. Needles and spears and stalagmites that fell—and pierced—and killed. I was back in the alcove, safe, and watched it all with a sort of growing horror. It was like watching a bunch of trained animals, or freaks, running around on a treadmill, while their squirrel cage burned around them.

This is the end of the Kids, I thought, half-horrified, half-sorry about it all. It seemed a tragic end.

I was almost right.

I backed up, to avoid any of the glass, for by this time the entire ceiling was going, the other two pillars not strong enough to bear the full weight of that ceiling; I backed into the alcove, and backed again, till I found something hard and tight pressed into the tiny of my back.

"Drop that weapon, Mr. Lunch," a calm, unflurried female voice said. I reached around ever so slow, man, till I felt what was in the small of my back. I dropped the Polarizer.

"You can do a ninety-degree turn," the voice said, and I played Do-As-I-Say so neatly she could have had no argument. I was facing a door. "Open it," she said. I opened it.

It was another one of those elevators.

"In." I got in. She followed right behind, and that little hollow circle that was the muzzle of a .45 stayed right with me. The elevator was dim inside, and she stayed right behind, so I didn't get at good look at her, but she said, "Press the top button." There were twenty-two or-three buttons on the string, and I jabbed the topmost one. The elevator hit for the ceiling and went on through.

We rode in silence for a time, then she said ironically, "Pure, dumb blind luck, Mr. Lunch. You realize that's all you've had, of course."

"Of course," I agreed. Damned if you'd catch me disagreeing with that .45 so handy.

"You happened to find us the night of our largest New York meeting in quite a while. Quite a while, Mr. Lunch. And your blundering ox stupidity has set us back quite a little bit."

"A bit," I agreed, and she jammed the .45 into my small vertebrae, so I decided mocking sarcasm was not in style.

The elevator came to a stop. "Open the door," she instructed me, and like Trilby I obeyed. We were inside a clothes closet. She herded me before

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her, and we passed through the sweetest-smelling batch of women's clothes you can imagine, and came out into a lighted bedroom. I looked around and it was a perfectly modern, normal woman's room. A big double bed, a bureau, a bookcase, a portable TV on a stand, and a dressing table with perfumes on the stand, and a big mirror above it on the wall. A big mirror—

I saw her in the mirror—

I also saw me see her, and saw my face go stark, sheet white. I didn't give a damn right then, about the .45 or anything. I was sure I was going insane. I had to look. I spun around and came face to face with the last person in the world I'd thought I'd see.

Martita Delgado.

Alive, very beautiful, and holding a steady, unwavering .45 at my head. I struggled with insanity, and just barely threw it two out of three.

"Y-you!" I blurted, originally.

The smile that crossed her lovely face might have put a Mona Lisa to shame, had she not been tinging it with hatred and something even deadlier.

"Lively for a corpse, aren't I?" she inquired.

I found my tongue was balled up like a little Persian kitten at the back of my throat. It purred gently, then went to sleep. "Oh, stop being so melodramatic, Mr. Lunch," she said, and laid the .45 down on the night table beside the bed. She sat down on the edge of the big double bed, and her skirt tightened across her thighs so neatly, for a split-second I almost forgot she was a member of the Children of Chaos . . . and that she was dead.

"I saw the left half of your head blown away and the edges of the wound turned to glass," I said haltingly. She smiled up at me with her best cover-girl enchanter. I eyed the pistol.

"It isn't loaded," she said. "You can pick it up and try it if you choose. It never was loaded. But I had to get you away from there before you did any more damage. And I didn't want you getting yourself killed.

"They'd have burned you down in another few minutes, as soon as the clods got their bearings and realized they were in no real danger." She was still smiling. She had the damnedest pretty cleft in her chin.

"You know I'm going to expose the lot of you, if I ever get the hell out of here alive," I said hard. I was bluffing; I

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was certain she wouldn't turn me loose. Was there another gun trained on me? She could not have been fool enough to bring me up here alone without protection.

She seemed to know what I was thinking. She threw one lovely hand out, and then fluffed her rich auburn hair with it. "Look around. We're quite alone," she taunted me. "I wanted to deal with you . . . in private, Mr. Lunch. May I call you Ray?"

"You may call me Mr. Lunch," I snapped back, "and I sure as hell *will* look around."

I looked; she was telling the truth. We were alone. I could have throttled her right then and there, and had done with it. But did I want to? According to the now-dead bird-birl, Freidl, Martita Delgado had been trying to break up this worldwide cult.

"Do you feel like telling me this bit from the beginning?" I asked, nasty despite myself.

"Can't you grasp it by yourself?"

"No, not the fine, shaded points," I replied. She settled back on the bed. Her breasts thrust up against the sheer material of the blouse she wore. I had to remember she had seven toes to each foot; it was the only thing I could think of about her that didn't appeal.

"We all came out of the blasts," she said.

"Not Hiroshima alone, surely?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, not just Hiroshima, though you'd be surprised how large the Far East membership of the Children of Chaos is. No, there have been many other blasts, and much change, though few people know about it. It's been going on for almost ten years. Not just in births, but actually in metabolic changes in each of us. Somehow, we began to band together, and then one day we realized we had to get rid of the Normals, before they got rid of us."

"Just like that," I snorted.

"Just," she snorted back. Her eyes flashed determination.

"During the past ten years we have caused many conflicts. The Israeli-Arab war, the Hungarian Uprising, the Argentinian overthrow of Peron. The— "

"The Korean War?" I burst through. She nodded, smugly. I wanted to strangle her right then. I'd lost a whole barracks-full of buddies on Bloody Ridge and the Chosen Reservoir.

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"We have caused them, and more. Assassinations, deaths that seemed to be natural, economic crises, we have been bringing the Normal world to the brink of tension and conflict. We were almost ready to strike our final blows tonight. But that meddling little fool Freidl and her glory-hogging!" her voice dripped with malice.

"I have been at the head of the Children for over eight years, and doing quite nicely, thank you, without any of the mutants actually knowing who ran the organization. I was the mind behind the Polarizer bomb plan. Through many of the scientists who were themselves contaminated and—ah—persuaded to help us—Einstein is with us still, you know, he never really died—we set up the bomb system.

"Then Freidl decided she and her group of thugs were going to turn me out, and take over the new world themselves."

She paused, and stretched again. My mouth went dry.

"She trailed me that night to Pfizer's place, and her thugs used the Polarizer on me . . ."

"I saw you dead . . ."

"You saw me unregenerated. They killed a section of me. Are you familiar with the attributes of the starfish, Ray?"

"Yeah. And I said you could call me Lunch."

"Yes, certainly, Ray. You know how the starfish can regrow sections of itself that have been damaged. Well, that happens to be *my* particular mutation. The toes are false; I merely used them to insure the others thinking I was like them, and yet not letting them know I was immortal, in essence. I was lying there, starting to regenerate, when Pfizer came in. I heard him calling you, but was still unable to move. Then they came back, to get my card, which Niles had already removed.

"I watched the whole thing. The scuffle between the thugs and Pfizer, their killing of him, your heroic entrance," she said the last humorously, and I could see how it might have seemed to, "and their turning to ashes. We call that breed Dusties, for obvious reasons.

"Then, when you left, with the card, I lay there till I had grown back, and took off after you. Do you recall what bars you hit when you left Pfizer's apartment?"

I couldn't, and shook my head.

"That's because you didn't hit any. You were in your own apartment, under a form

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of auto-hypnosis, while I placed your prints across a marble bust I'd brought with me from Niles's apartment. Then I left you and replaced the bust where I had been.

"I certainly didn't expect you to go into action so soon. I was counting on them putting you in jail—at least till we had destroyed most of the world with the Polarizers. I've been looking for you for ten years, Ray."

I was going to ask her what she meant, but she passed over that one very quickly, and went on, "But the police let you roam free, and you went right to that little ass Freidl. She saw in you a threat, the fool, and tried to kill you. I, of course, was unable to interfere, and was thrilled when you showed up at the meeting. What was to have been my triumph, Freidl usurped, and she got what she deserved.

"Now all that is finished, and her faction is dispersed. Those of her group who have not been taken care of already by my own followers, will soon be dispensed with."

So there was trouble within the Kids themselves. That made me happy.

"Now we can go on together. Now that I've found you, and you know what the future holds in store for us, we can be the King and Queen of the new world . . ."

She would have kept on like that, but I stopped her sharply with, "What the hell are you gibbering about?"

"Haven't you guessed?" she asked. "Don't you know what I've been trying to tell you? Why do you think I haven't had you killed? Why do you think I saved your life downstairs?"

I was stumped and told her so.

"You and I are the same," she cried. "The same. We are both regenerative immortals. Husband and wife in kind."

I boggled. She was insane. "What are you talking about?"

She looked up at me with the sexiest expression I've ever seen on a woman, and launched into it. I was stunned, and just listened to it all without saying a word.

"Why do you think you lost your license? I couldn't have you in a line of work where you might be too badly hurt, or dismembered to regenerate, or where your power would be noticed by others. I trumped up that libel suit, and had your ticket removed. With you as a brush salesman, you were safe, and were held in abeyance till the day of my ruler-

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ship came to be. You would still have known nothing of the Children of Chaos, had it not been coincidence that I posed for Pfizer and that Freidl picked the night I was to model for him to attempt her assassination."

"Are you trying to tell me I'm immortal?"

"That's right, Ray. That's right, my darling. Together we can rule the world. The new world that will be ours!"

"A world of monsters and sick minds?" I asked nastily.

Her eyes flashed again, and she said, "It will be a new world. A brave and a fine one. No war, no killing, no hatred—"

"And you're going to found this new world on the ashes of the old, with all the wars and killing and hatred you so despise? Is that it?"

"Ray, don't be like that," she pleaded, and I could see a loneliness swimming in her deep green eyes. I looked at her, and thought it might not be such a bad new world at that.

Then I thought of Pfizer, and the way Martita had looked on that stand in his apartment, all dead and blown away, and Freidl, and the rest of the Kids. It made me so sick, I wanted to die, but she was reaching up toward me.

She wanted me then, and she was offering not only her immortal self, but the world with it.

I bent toward her, and my arms started around her neck, to embrace her, but they had a life of their own, and the hands struck her windpipe, and the thumbs pressed, and her eyes bugged out and her mouth opened and the scream was cut off, and her tongue bulged till her face grew gray with loss of air, and then . . . in a moment that strung out till eternity, she was dead.

I looked down at her for a moment, and then stumbled out of the room. I could see through a window in the apartment that I was in another section of Freidl's apartment building. A phone swam into sight, and I dialed Manhattan Homicide West. They couldn't get to Goldie Harper right away, but I held on and they rang him up in his prowl car, and after a little bit I told him everything.

Everything but that I was immortal, too.

Oh, I didn't doubt that for a second. She had told me the truth right to the end, with that loneliness of hers—the loneliness only an immortal woman could know—showing; and I told Goldie where to find

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the Kids. I knew that now the people had been informed of what was happening, there would be a terrible witch hunt, and the deaths of many innocents—those who merely had large birthmarks, or were slightly deformed—but it would even out in the long run. The human race would be saved, and the Kids would be destroyed.

Homo sapiens would triumph over this new species.

But was it right? Did man deserve to survive over man with his new talents and his new attributes? I didn't know, but it wasn't my problem.

My problem came when I had hung up.

Because I went back to look at her and she was gone. She had regenerated,—as I should have known she would—and she was gone.

So that meant the Children of Chaos were not dead . . . merely chased into hiding, in the beautiful form of Martita Delgado. Now there was only me to go out and find her, wherever she might be, and bring her back, or destroy her. For she was a cancer, a sickness, a bad spot that had to be cut out. I was the one who had to find her and do it, wherever she might be.

I left the apartment, to begin searching, and only when I had reached the street, did I realize something:

If you—the Normals—are going to be witch-hunting the Kids, you will be hunting me, too. For I am as much one of them in kind, as Martita was. I'm immortal, and nothing can kill me. You will be searching for me, when you are searching for the two-headed man who runs things in Anchorage, or the split-tongued child who is head of the Bolivian Assassination Group, or the fat woman who roams with the circus as a disguise for her activities as the head of the French Children of Chaos movement.

You will be searching for me, too, even as I search for Martita.

And though I don't want the Kids to go on, though I don't want man to be stamped out, still I don't want to die either, and if you come too close, I'll have to fight back.

I'm sorry, but that's the way it is.

THE END

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The Seventh Planet

By LES COLLINS

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

There have been complaints that s-f writers take incredible liberties when visualizing possible life forms in the reaches of the universe. This may well be true, but let's consider it from this angle: Would not a writer on a planet umpteen light years beyond X galaxy possibly be ridiculed for visualizing our life forms—say a turtle or a zebra or a man or even a rose bud—accurately? Actually, writers like Les Collins do Creation honor by refusing to set limits on her versatility.

AT LAST! After 50 years of fruitless searching, Earth finally was to make contact with another culture, another civilization.

Intelligence brought Captain James Sturgis the news shortly after the expedition had made the planetfall. For a few brief moments, Sturgis allowed the

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waves of satisfaction to sweep over him. This was Man's moment—Sturgis thought of the many expeditions and men who'd gone into the depths of space, some never to return, in search for a "brother" civilization. They were good men all, and he accepted the instant on behalf of them. Now the people of Earth would no longer feel alone.

Ten years it had taken. Ten years since the faster-than-light drive had been perfected. Sturgis thought, too, of his friend, Dr. Ray Nolan, who'd worked all his life to get that drive and who hadn't lived to see this moment.

The mood broke: Sturgis was pre-eminently a practical man, and there was much work to do. He called a staff conference.

They shuffled into the room, in the fashion of the typical spaceman's walk, and, midst the scraping of chairs, lighting of cigarettes, and bits of shop talk, settled down. There was something a bit different about this conference, however: tension. It was in the air, perhaps communicated to these men by the captain himself, perhaps as a result of the wild tales circulating about the ship.

"Well, gentlemen," Sturgis began incisively, "I suppose you've heard the rumors. They're true—the planet we're approaching has traces of a high order of civilization!"

His deep bass tones echoed throughout a silent room, hanging in the air for a second; then full realization of what he'd said came to the others. Their enthusiasm bubbled.

When he finally had quieted them, Sturgis continued. "I want all exploration teams carefully re-instructed as to procedures. They are to stay together under the direct control of each team leader.

"In particular, I want no miscellaneous touching of anything unless the natives so offer, and I will not stand for souvenir hunting. Please bear in mind the lesson of Mars in the early days of space exploration: we almost ruined the planet for the archeologists with our heedless desecration of the temples, and the garbage after a picnic floating in the canals.

"What we've seen so far are a series of city-like entities, scattered randomly about the planet. Our approach will be as follows . . ." The rest of the meeting consisted of technical details devoted to this First Contact of races.

They landed outside one of the cities and waited. For the hundredth time, Sturgis contacted the Linguistics Section.

"Everything set?" he asked into the intercom.

"Yes, sir." The reply was tired.

"What about the Transcencephalator?"

"Sir!" There was a touch of annoyance in the answering

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tones. "We spent several years developing that gadget. We found out how to break patterns of thought into components, convert them into several varying currents, and reassemble into a transducer for vocal pickup. You know we've been able to contact a chimpanzee, though on a low level. The thing does work, and I guarantee it will work on this planet, if whatever we're going to meet has thoughts and a body so I can adjust the machine to it. We'll make contact, rest assured." Church, head of Linguistics, emphasized the last statement slightly, to express disapproval of what he considered nagging.

"Right," said Sturgis, breaking contact and shaking his head. He hadn't the heart to remind the other of the numerous failures that occurred, the misinterpretations given because of variation in waveforms. The simple truth was that the Transcencephalator was not completely reliable. Nevertheless, they *had* done wonders with it; most of the time the electronic miracle could be depended on.

The captain then checked, in order, Chemistry, Biology, Morphosapology—once known as Anthropology till remains of other intelligences were found—and even Paleopathology. They were all ready. He had nothing to do but wait. And wait . . . and wait . . .

Finally, Sturgis yielded to the urge which had helped make him a man: curiosity. He ordered a team from the ship—under his command, of course, and they set out.

The haunting dread that had begun to make itself felt to him—that here, as on Mars, was a planet deserted—now appeared to be more and more a strong possibility. The streets were empty.

The city itself was peculiar. It consisted of block after block of shed-like one-story buildings. Randomly scattered here and there were two-foot cubes of nonmetallic, graycolored substance. On one face was a small cone, about three or four inches in altitude, arranged parallel to the ground. And that was all. Nothing stirred except the soft breezes that played tag in the streets.

The question *Where are the occupants of this city?* burned their lips, their hearts, and their minds. And then a violent argument broke out which Sturgis had to arbitrate.

"Sir, I know you've given orders against it, but if we could open up one of those cubes . . . after all, *we're* not souvenir hunting—" said Royale of Geology.

"No!" roared Bailey, the morphosapologist. "Perhaps these things have a definite purpose. How do we know, for instance, that the missing race isn't a migratory one? How do we know they won't suddenly ap-

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pear, ready to occupy their summer quarters?"

Sturgis agreed. They continued looking, not touching, but it was the same throughout the city. When they'd finished, Sturgis finally realized they had to enter the buildings. With some trepidation, he okayed the entering— "Breaking and entering," he said crankily.

The building was long and low. It seemed to ramble in an angular sort of way. There were no doors; the entrance was low, about four or five feet from threshold to lintel.

Inside, the ceiling was lower than what the Earthmen were used to; it wasn't much over six feet. A long hallway led to the end of the building—and a series of small rooms were arranged on either side of the hall.

In hushed tones, White, the chemistry man, said, "I don't know; perhaps it has some religious significance. Makes me want to whisper."

"Yes," Sturgis agreed, also in low tones, "it looks sort of familiar to me in some way. Wish I could remember what it reminds me of . . ."

They entered one of the rooms. Dominating it, in the center, was a small truncated pyramid, the top area supporting another of the cubes they'd seen outside. However, this one was about twice the size of the others.

Royale, bending close to examine it, answered Sturgis's admonishment. "No, no, I wasn't going to touch it. But look—there's a small crack running down the middle. It's almost as if two of the cubes were joined together." They examined it but came to no conclusion. They examined the rest of the room, the other strange shapes: coils, almost at floor level, hanging from the ceiling; translucent tertartoids piled up Christmas-tree fashion.

In room after room, the story was the same. The place was obviously deserted. What they were seeing had some meaning; of that they were all agreed. But for each man there was a different interpretation of that meaning.

The only real differences anywhere in the building were in the cubes. A third type was found, and it actually was the most common. One face of it was concave, also in the form of a small cone.

"We have, then," said Sturgis, "two or three of these cubes. One with a convexity, one with a concavity, and a third form which might be a combination of the other two."

There were arguments about this statement, the whole dominated by Royale's reproachful, "Until we take one apart, we'll never know . . ."

They tried another building, and discovered what they already knew instinctively. It, too, was deserted; it, too, was the same in layout and design.

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Another . . . and another. Farther and farther apart became their selections, to no avail. Even to the most die-hard, it became obvious the city was, in fact, deserted.

Discouraged, they returned to the ship.

Sturgis called another staff conference. "All right," he said, "I have dispatched the helicopter to the closest city for more exploration. How many cities did you observe as we approached?"

"Eight, all told," answered Briggs, Geography; "though there may be more. Further study will indicate—"

"We won't need any more," interrupted Sturgis. "Five or less, chosen at random, will tell us what we want to know."

"I'll be willing to go out on a limb with that information right now," drawled Church, the Linguistics man.

"I'm no happier about this than you," answered the leader, "for a more personal reason. I will be relieved of my command if we fail this trip. This is my last crack at the job—HQ feels it has to turn its commands over, for morale purposes." He paused, bitterly feeling the unfairness; then he continued, "Be that as it may, from all the signs we have here another empty planet—a shell, devoid of the life which once made it throb with vitality. I said 'another empty planet' deliberately. There have been others."

Briggs looked puzzled. "We know. The ancient traces—"

"I don't mean those!" Sturgis snapped an interruption. "I've been digging into the *Official Historical Record* that is given to each captain before the expedition departs. It is the latest summary of knowledge: volumes of space worked, the years involved, results, and the like. In the last half-century, five other expeditions ran into this same situation."

"Same?" questioned White.

"Yes—a planet, as though recently deserted, with the same architecture and the same cubes lying about. And the same problem facing the other captains, too. The primary mission is to find intelligent life; time is important. It would be nice if we could afford to stay and study, but we must go on. It was the obvious solution to the others; it is mine, too."

He sagged inwardly, washed by waves of disappointment. But then, Sturgis—a man devoted to a cause—straightened and fought his continuing, eternal fight. "No one claimed this would be an easy job; you didn't have to hire on. From the time we were apes, we've battled Nature. We controlled fire and caused a ripple; we utilized atomics and kicked Nature in the shin. Now we're interstellar, and by the stars themselves, we'll pick up this Universe and shake it till intelligent life falls out. We are among the privileged few explorers carrying out

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the highest mission our species has afforded us.

"Perhaps it won't be this landing, or this year, or in our span of time, but find it we shall!"

It was the shot in the arm they all needed, the strengthener to brace against after their hopes, risen so high, had been dashed. And dashed they were. Day after day, from city after city, came the report: nothing stirred.

Wearily, Sturgis grounded the helicopter and ordered departure. In the midst of preparations, Royale visited him.

"What about this planet?" Royale asked.

"What about it?" the captain asked in reply.

"Are we to leave it, the mystery still unsolved?"

"Listen, Royale," said Sturgis, "I'm just as curious as you about what happened here. Remember, this is my last command. Unfortunately, our mission is to find intelligent life, not the remains of it. This planet has been duly charted; in a century or two, the archeology boys will follow behind us. Sorry."

"We still have some time before takeoff. How about letting me return to the city till then?" asked the geologist.

Sturgis mulled over the request. Then he grinned. "As a matter of fact, I know you've been sneaking in there despite my orders. And I've been wondering myself "

The two men stood once more in the city. The sun was approaching the horizon; odd shadows, not present on their first trip, now twisted eerily through the alien metropolis.

"Something's not right," said Royale nervously.

"You've noticed it too?" asked Sturgis.

"Yes—can't say what it is, but it reminds me of one of those psych tests where they ask you to pick the two similar pictures from a group of ten. They all look very much alike yet you know there are differences, there are—"

"That's it, that's *it!* You've got it!" cried Sturgis.

"What?"

"Don't you see? The cubes—there are dozens more, and the others have been moved. I remember now: that one there wasn't in the intersection of those streets but on the corner." Sturgis pointed, to emphasize the cube he had in mind.

The two men stood beside the object, staring curiously at it.

"*Now* can we take it apart and see how it ticks?" asked Royale.

Sturgis gaped at it, trancing. Then he looked up at the geologist. "Hell, no—not if my theory is correct. You wouldn't want to be carving up the inhabitants, would you?"

Royale's jaw dropped. Sturgis continued, "What if these cubes are living intelligences, but with a metabolism so slow their

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movements to us would seem imperceptible?"

Royale nodded. "It would fit—it'd sure fit."

"Well then, let's get back to the ship with this thing and test the theory. Let's see if we can talk to it on Church's Transencephalator."

Each man picked up a cube, and the two made tracks back to the ship.

They turned the specimens over to Church and went to Sturgis' cabin to await results. Rumor spread like wildfire: within moments most of the staff had appeared, and they too waited, pacing.

Shortly after came the knock at the door they most wanted to hear, and Church entered.

"Sorry," he said, "but it's mostly negative. I can't get anything through *to* it, and the sounds coming out of the machine are a weird collection of bass noises."

"Wait a minute!" Sturgis' voice cut through their gloom. "If it lives so much slower than we, perhaps it thinks slower too. Slow down your tape, and try again."

"Of course—!" Church flew from the room.

Again they paced. The time dragged by interminably until Church once more appeared. Now they would know the success or failure of Man's highest mission; now they would know if there was to be a meeting of the minds, the spirit.

Church shook his head. "It's alive all right, though on a very primitive level. Listen, if you don't believe me."

He dialed the ship's central data recording system, ordered playback, and the familiar metallic tones spoke in alien thoughts to the men: . . . *pleasure—what a broad! . . . hungry . . . we have six planets, good, huh? . . six, six, sex . . . what a broad! . . . brood, where's the brood? . . . This babe had the most—*

The description that followed was liberally interspersed with four-letter nouns. Church, hands spread with palms turned upward, shrugged helplessly. "We programmed it with the simplest, most descriptive words possible. The cube is still thinking in its own terms; what you get are equivalents."

Sturgis said angrily, "I don't care if it swears in fourteen languages—it's the content that's of significance. You can almost hear a small trickle of metallic drool coming from one corner of its mouth; the thing is an idiot. What about the other?"

"Same."

The captain sighed. "Well, it isn't much, but at least we can take some of these home."

White, with a strange look, commented, "Like Columbus and the Indians?"

"These aren't as intelligent. I doubt if they are more than sub-mental at best."

"There is another possibility,"

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Royale suggested. "They might be the end result of species that have deteriorated." He paused in thought, then continued somewhat pedantically, in the fashion of geologists, "I rather lean to that theory, in view of the reported findings elsewhere, the cities, and the cube's own thoughts about 'planets.'"

Sturgis nodded. "Possible, but that blasted machine has its limitations. Church, what are the possibilities of any one word, especially a complex word expressing knowledge of astronomy, being translated exactly?"

The Linguistics man shook his head. "Not good, but—"

"It's really academic, in any case. We're leaving tomorrow. Royale, take some men to collect a few more of the cubes; bring back assorted shapes and sizes. Church, go sit on those things until you find out what they eat—stay with it all night, if necessary. White, get the biochemists to analyze the cubes—"

"Where do I get samples?" came the quiet interruption.

"I was coming to that. Bailey, you're the morphosap; if these things have any sort of culture, they must bury their dead. Find the graveyard. Briggs, geography should fit in somewhere . . . you can help undig the graves. Let's move!"

They moved; departure activity became intense; and in the course of that afternoon and night, events of significance occurred:

At 1800, Galactic, Royale returned with 10 cubes of the three different types and of different sizes.

At 0439, Church went to bed—after a bleary-eyed report that the cubes dined, basically, on sodium silicofluoride.

At 0744, Bailey and party were recalled for takeoff. They had failed to find any dead, and they had failed to find any semblance of a graveyard in "that crazy beehive of a city."

Of these three significant events, the last carried the most import . . .

Captain James Sturgis was not unintelligent. If he failed to integrate logically all data, it was because of his emotional turmoil: worrying about the departure and returning to Earth relatively emptyhanded and—worse—losing his command. But with the three-day flight home, in and out of hyper, he had time to think. He grew uncommunicative, sullen, and wore a frown.

It was on the third day, just as the time neared for the reentry approach, that Royale entered the captain's cabin. Royale, too, had a sober face.

"I've done some thinking in the last three days; come to some weird conclusions," the geologist said.

Sturgis drummed nervous fingers on a desk, uttered no sound, waiting.

Royale continued, "We've been feeding the cubes synthesized sillicofluoride. They thrive on it . . . too well. I just took a

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count: there are now fourteen of them, and four are quite small."

"They're breeding, of course!" came the husky reply. "That's why we found two different types, two sexes, and the third —two cubes coupled together— was . . ."

"Something else, Captain. They're trying to build a city in Starboard Two hold. It's rudimentary but definitely cube architecture; there wasn't enough room, so the bulkhead has been corroded and . . . shoved aside."

Sturgis snapped his fingers. "Now I remember what that building reminded me of, the first time we entered. Bailey unknowingly recognized it, too, when he said 'beehive of a city.' Royal breeding chambers of social insects—"

The intercom squawked a tinny interruption: "Five minutes!"

Sturgis ignored the warning. "It goes together like the answer to a puzzle," he mused, then abruptly changed the subject. "What do you think of death?"

Royale straightened, looked at him with level gaze. "It has to come, later . . . or sooner."

Sturgis nodded slightly and called Church. "Hook up one of the cubes in the Transencephalator; make it direct contact— I'll be right down!"

"What?" came the intercom reply, "do you realize it's less than five minutes to—"

"Don't argue!" Sturgis commanded, cutting off. He motioned Royale out, started to accompany, then stopped. "Oh, yes. I almost forgot: the panic button." Quickly, he dialed Emergency Control.

Emco. The tones were flat, unemotional.

Sturgis took one deep breath, then: "Seven no trump!"

Double. Still unemotional, but how could a machine feel?

"My partner can't take me out," Sturgis said, "Redouble!"

The connection went dead. The captain looked around the cabin once, then walked out with Royale.

In Linquistics, Sturgis talked to a cube for the first time. "Listen, idiot! Try to listen, anyway. I know your secret; it isn't really a secret to you because you're practically unreasoning, a blob of instinct. Yet you almost defeated Man who is intelligent, capable. I said *almost.* It's too late to turn the ship, and I can't take a chance on landing—some of you might escape. However, and I hope this penetrates to you, individualistic man has certain qualities as good as socially-organized life forms. Sacrificing for the good of all is one. What you don't know is that any moment this ship will blow space-high. If you aren't destroyed, you'll become incandescent from falling through our atmosphere. If that doesn't do it, you'll hit Earth at a speed close to twenty miles a second. Now laugh!"

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WORLD BEYOND PLUTO

A "Johnny Mayhem" Adventure

By C. H. THAMES

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

Johnny Mayhem, one of the most popular series characters ever to appear in AMAZING, *has been absent too long. So here's good news for Mayhem fans; another great adventure of the Man of Many Bodies.*

THEY loaded the over-age spaceship at night because Triton's one spaceport was too busy with the oreships from Neptune during the day to handle it.

"Symphonies!" Pitchblend Hardesty groaned. Pitchblend Hardesty was the stevedore foreman and he had supervised upwards of a thousand loadings on Triton's crowded blastways, everything from the standard mining equipment to the innards of a new tavern for Triton City's so-called Street of Sin to special anti-riot weapons for the Interstellar Penitentiary not 54 miles from Triton City, but never a symphony orchestra. And most assuredly never, never an all-girl symphony orchestra.

"Symphonies!" Pitchblend Hardesty groaned again as several stevedores came out on the blastway lugging a harp, a base fiddle and a kettle drum.

"Come off it, Pitchblend," one of the stevedores said with a grin. "I didn't see you staying away from the music hall."

That was true enough, Pitchblend Hardesty had to admit. He was a small, wiry man with amazing strength in his slim body and the lore of a solar system which had been bypassed by thirtieth century civilization for the lures of interstellar exploration in his brain. While the symphony—the all-girl symphony—had been playing its engagement at Triton's makeshift music hall, Hardesty had visited the place three times.

"Well, it wasn't the music, sure as heck," he told his critic now. "Who ever saw a hundred girls in one place at one time on Triton?"

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The stevedore rolled his eyes and offered Pitchblend a suggestive whistle. Hardesty booted him in the rump, and the stevedore had all he could do to stop from falling into the kettle drum.

Just then a loud bell set up a lonely tolling and Pitchblend Hardesty exclaimed: "Prison break!"

The bell could be heard all over the two-hundred square miles of inhabitable Triton, under the glassite dome which enclosed the small city, the spaceport, the immigration station for nearby Neptune and the Interstellar Penitentiary. The bell hadn't tolled for ten years; the last time it had tolled, Pitchblend Hardesty had been a newcomer on Neptune's big moon. That wasn't surprising, for Interstellar Penitentiary was as close to escape-proof as a prison could be.

"All right, all right," Pitchblend snapped. "Hurry up and get her loaded."

"What's the rush?" one of the stevedores asked. "The gals ain't even arrived from the hotel yet."

"I'll tell you what the rush is," Pitchblend declared as the bell tolled again. "If you were an escaped prisoner on Triton, just where would you head?"

"Why, I don't know for sure, Pitchblend."

"Then I'll tell you where. You'd head for the spaceport, fast as your legs could carry you. You'd head for an outgoing spaceship, because it would be your only hope. And how many outgoing spaceships are there tonight?"

"Why, just two or three."

"Because all our business is in the daytime. So if the convict was smart enough to get out, he'll be smart enough to come here."

"We got no weapons," the stevedore said. "We ain't even got a pea-shooter."

"Weapons on Triton? You kidding? A frontier moon like this, the place would be blasted apart every night. Interstelpen couldn't hold all the disturbers of the peace if we had us some guns."

"But the convict—"

"Yeah," Pitchblend said grimly. "He'll be armed, all right."

Pitchblend rushed back to the manifest shed as the bell tolled a third time. He got on the phone and called the desk of the Hotel Triton.

"Hardesty over at the spaceport," he said. "Loading foreman."

"Loading foreman?" The mild, antiseptic voice at the other end of the connection said it as you would say talking dinosaur.

"Yeah, loading foreman. At night I'm in charge here. Listen, you the manager?"

"The manager—" haughtily —"is asleep. I am the night clerk."

"O.K., then. You tell those hundred girls of yours to hurry. Don't scare them, but have you

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heard about the prison break?"

"Heard about it? It's all I've been hearing. They—they want to stay and see what happens."

"Don't let 'em!" roared Pitchblend. "Use any excuse you have to. Tell 'em we got centrifigal-upigal and perihelion-peritonitus over here at the spaceport, or any darn thing. Tell 'em if they want to blast off tonight, they'll have to get down here quick. You got it?"

"Yes, but—"

"Then do it." Pitchblend hung up.

The escape bell tolled a fourth time.

His name was House Bartock, he had killed two guards in his escape, and he was as desperate as a man could be. He had been sentenced to Interstelpen for killing a man on Mars in this enlightened age when capital punishment had been abolished. Recapture thus wouldn't mean death, but the prison authorities at Interstelpen could make their own interpretations of what life-in-prison meant. If House Bartock allowed himself to be retaken, he would probably spend the remaining years of his life in solitary confinement.

He walked quickly now, but he did not run. He had had an impulse to run when the first escape bell had tolled, but that would have been foolish. Already he was on the outskirts of Triton City because they had not discovered his escape for two precious hours. He could hole up in the city, lose himself somewhere. But that would only be temporary.

They would find him eventually.

Or, he could make his way to the spaceport. He had money in his pocket—the dead guard's. He had a guardsman's uniform on, but stripped of its insignia it looked like the jumper and top-boots of any spaceman. He had false identification papers, if needed, which he had worked on for two years in the prison printshop where the prison newspaper was published. He had . . .

Suddenly he flattened himself on the ground to one side of the road, hugging the gravel and hardly daring to breathe. He'd heard a vehicle coming from the direction of Interstelpen. It roared up, making the ground vibrate; its lights flashed; it streaked by trailing a jet of fire.

House Bartock didn't move until the afterglow had faded. Then he got up and walked steadily along the road which led from Interstelpen to Triton City.

"Girls! Hurry with your packing! Girls!"

Sighing, Matilda Moriarity subsided. The girls, obviously, were in no hurry. That would have been out of character.

Matilda Moriarity sighed again. She was short, stocky, fifty-two years old and the widow of a fabulously wealthy interstellar investment broker.

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She had a passion for classical music and, now that her husband had been dead three years, she had decided to exercise that passion. But for Matilda Moriarity, a very out-going fifty-two, exercising it had meant passing it on. The outworlds, Matilda had told her friends, lacked culture. The highest form of culture, for Matilda, was classical music. Very well. She would bring culture to the outworlds.

Triton was her first try and even now sometimes she had to pinch herself so she'd know the initial attempt had been a smashing success. She didn't delude herself completely. It had been a brainstorm selecting only girls—and pretty young things, at that—for the Interstellar Symphony. On a world like Triton, a world which played host to very few women and then usually to the hard types who turned up on any frontier in any century, a symphony of a hundred pretty girls was bound to be a success.

But the music, Matilda Moriarity told herself. They had listened to the music. If they wanted to see the girls in their latest Earth-style evening gowns, they had to listen to the music. And they had listened quietly, earnestly, apparently enjoying it. The symphony had remained on Triton longer than planned, playing every night to a full house. Matilda had had the devil's own time chaperoning her girls, but that was to be expected. It was their first taste of the outworlds; it was the outworlds' first taste of them. The widow Moriarity had had her hands full, all right. But secretly, she had enjoyed every minute of it.

"They say the bell means a prison break!" First Violin squealed excitedly. First Violin was twenty-two, an Earth girl named Jane Cummings and a student at the conservatory on Sirtus Major on Mars, but to the widow Moriarity she was, and would remain, First Violin. That way, calling the girls after their instruments, the widow Moriarity could convince herself that her symphonic music had been of prime importance on Triton, and her lovely young charges of secondary importance.

"How many times do I have to tell you to hurry?"

"But these gowns—"

"Will need a pressing when you return to Mars anyway."

"And a prison break. I never saw a prison break before. It's so exciting."

"You're not going to see it. You're just going to hear about it. Come on, come on, all of you."

At that moment the room phone rang.

"Hello?" the widow Moriarity said.

"This is Jenkins, ma'am, desk. The spaceport called a few minutes ago. I'm not supposed to frighten you, but, well, they're rather worried about the prison break. The escaped convict, they

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figure, will head for the spaceport. Disguised, he could—"

"Let him try masquerading as a member of *my* group!" the widow Moriarity said with a smile.

"All the same, if you could hurry—"

"We are hurrying, young man."

"Yes, ma'am."

The widow Moriarity hung up. "Gi-irls!"

The girls squealed and laughed and dawdled.

House Bartock felt like laughing.

He'd just had his first big break, and it might turn out to be the only one he needed. On an impulse, he had decided to strike out directly for the spaceport. He had done so, and now stood on the dark tarmac between the manifest shed and the pilot-barracks. And, not ten minutes after he had reached the spacefield a cordon of guards rushed there from Interstelpen had been stationed around the field. Had Bartock arrived just a few minutes later, he would have been too late, his capture only a matter of time. As it was now, though, he had a very good chance of getting away. Circumstances were in his favor.

He could get so far away that they would never find him.

It was simple. Get off Triton on a spaceship. Go anyplace that had a big spaceport, and manage to tranship out in secret. Then all the police would have to search would be a few quadrillion square miles of space!

But first he had to leave Triton.

From the activity at the port, he could see that three ships were being made ready for blast-off. Two of them were purely cargo-carriers, but the third—Bartock could tell because he saw hand-luggage being loaded—would carry passengers. His instinct for survival must have been working overtime: he knew that the third ship would be his best bet, for if he were discovered and pursued, hostages might make the difference between recapture and freedom.

Bartock waited patiently in the darkness outside the pilot-barracks. The only problem was, how to discover which pilot belonged to which ship?

The cordon of police from Interstelpen had set up several score arc-lights on the perimeter of the field. The spaces between the lights were patrolled by guards armed, as Bartock was, with blasters. Bartock could never have made it through that cordon now. But it wasn't necessary. He was already inside.

The barracks door opened, and a pilot came out. Tensing, ready, Bartock watched him.

The three ships were scattered widely on the field, *Venus Bell* to the north, *Star of Hercules* to the south, *Mozart's Lady* to the east. *Venus Bell* and *Star of Hercules* were straight cargo carriers. *Mozart's Lady*—what a queer name for a spaceship,

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Bartock couldn't help thinking —had taken in hand luggage. So if the pilot who had just left the barracks headed east, Bartock would take him. The pilot paused outside, lit a cigarette, hummed a tune. The scent of tobacco drifted over to Bartock. He waited.

The pilot walked east toward *Mozart's Lady*.

"Ready, girls?"

"Ready, Mrs. Moriarity. But couldn't we—well—sort of hang around until we see what happens?"

"You mean the escaped convict?"

"Yes, ma'am." Hopefully.

"They'll catch him. They always catch them."

"But—"

"Come on."

"Aw, gosh, Mrs. Moriarity."

"I said, come on."

Reluctantly, the hundred girls trooped with their chaperone from the hotel.

Bartock struck swiftly and without mercy.

The blaster would make too much noise. He turned it around, held it by the barrel, and broke the pilot's skull with it. In the darkness he changed clothing for the second time that night, quickly, confidently, his hands steady. In the darkness he could barely make out the pilot's manifest. The man's ship was *Mozart's Lady*, all right. Outbound from Triton City for Mars. Well, Bartock thought, he wouldn't go to Mars. Assuming they learned what ship he had boarded, they would be guarding the inner orbits too closely.

He would take *Mozart's Lady* daringly outward, beyond Neptune's orbit. Naturally, the ship wouldn't have interstellar drive, but as yet Bartock wasn't going interstellar. You couldn't have everything. You couldn't expect a starship on Triton, could you? So Bartock would take *Mozart's Lady* outward to Pluto's orbit—and wait. From the amount of hand luggage taken aboard, *Mozart's Lady* would be carrying quite a number of passengers. If that number were reduced—drastically reduced—the food, water and air aboard would last for many months. Until the fuss died down. Until Bartock could bring *Mozart's Lady*, long since given up for lost, in for a landing on one of the inner planets . . .

Now he dragged the dead pilot's body into the complete darkness on the south side of the pilot-barracks, wishing he could hide it better but knowing he didn't have the time or the means.

Then he walked boldly across the tarmac, wearing a pilot's uniform, toward *Mozart's Lady*.

Fifteen minutes later, House Bartock watched with amazement while a hundred pretty young women boarded the ship. Of all the things that had happened since his escape, this came closest to unnerving him, for it was the totally unexpected. Bar-

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tock shrugged, chain-smoked three cigarettes while the women boarded slowly, taking last-minute looks at dark Triton, the spaceport, the cordon of guards, the arc-lights. Bartock cursed impotently. Seconds were precious now. The pilot's body might be found. If it were . . .

At last the port clanged shut and the ground-crew tromped away. Since even an over-age ship like *Mozart's Lady* was close to ninety percent automatic, there was no crew. Only the pilot—who was Bartock—and the passengers.

Bartock was about to set the controls for blastoff when he heard footsteps clomp-clomping down the companionway. He toyed with the idea of locking the door, then realized that would arouse suspicion.

A square woman's face over a plump middle-aged figure.

"I'm Mrs. Moriarity, pilot. I have a hundred young girls aboard. We'll have no nonsense."

"No, sir. I mean, no ma'am."

"Well, make sure."

"Yes, ma'am."

"And I want an easy trip, without fuss or incidents. For half of our girls it's the second time in space—the first being when they came out here. You understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"What happened to the pilot who took us out?"

"Uh, pressed into service last week on a Mercury run. I'm surprised the control board didn't tell you."

"They didn't. It doesn't matter. You do your job, and that's all."

"Yes, ma'am," House Bartock said. "Just my job."

A few moments later, *Mozart's Lady* blasted off.

"Stop! Hey, wait!" Pitchblend Hardesty bawled at the top of his voice. But it didn't do any good. The police rushed up behind Pitchblend, not daring to fire.

Moments before, they had found the dead pilot's body.

They knew at once what it meant, of course. They had been not more than a minute too late.

"Call Central Control on Neptune," a police officer said. "We'll send a cruiser after them."

"Won't do any good," Pitchblend Hardesty groaned.

"What are you talking about, fellow?"

"Unless the cruiser's brand new."

"On Neptune? Don't be silly. Newest one we've got is ten years old."

"Like I said, won't do any good. I worked that ship over, mister. I know what she's like inside. She may look like an over-age tub on the outside, but don't let that fool you. She's got power, mister. She's probably the fastest thing this side of the Jovian moons, except for those experimental one-man rocket-bombs down at Neptune Station. But chasing a big tub in a one-

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man space-bound coffin—" here Pitchblend used the vernacular for the tiny one-man experimental ships— "ain't going to do anybody any good. Best thing you can do is track *Mozart's Lady* by radar and hope she'll head sunward. Then they could intercept her closer in."

But *Mozart's Lady* did not head sunward. Radar tracking confirmed this moments later. *Mozart's Lady* was outward bound for Pluto's orbit. And, with Pluto and Neptune currently in conjunction, that could even mean a landing, although, the police decided, that wasn't likely. There were no settlements on Pluto. Pluto was too weird. For the strangest reason in a solar system and a galaxy of wonders, Pluto was quite uninhabitable. More likely, *Mozart's Lady* would follow Pluto's orbit around, then make a dash sunward . . .

The radar officer threw up his hands. "I give up," he said. "She's heading for Pluto's orb all right. Call Neptune Station."

"Neptune Station, sir?"

"You bet. This job's too big for me. The brass will want to handle it."

Seconds later, sub-space crackled with energy as the call was put through from Triton City to Neptune Station.

Whatever else history would write about him, it would certainly call Johnny Mayhem the strangest—and literally most death-defying—test-pilot in history. Of course, testing the sleek experimental beauties out of Neptune Station and elsewhere wasn't Mayhem's chief occupation. He was, in a phrase, a trouble-shooter for the Galactic League. Whenever he had a spare few weeks, having completed an assignment ahead of schedule in his latest of bodies, he was likely to turn up at some testing station or other and volunteer for work. He was never turned down, although the Galactic League didn't approve. Mayhem was probably the galaxy's best pilot, with incredible reflexes and an utter indifference toward death.

For the past two weeks, having completed what turned out to be an easier-than-expected assignment on Neptune, he had been piloting the space-bound coffins out of Neptune Station, and with very satisfactory experimental results.

A few minutes ago he had been called into the station director's office, but when he entered he was surprised to see the Galactic League Firstman of Neptune waiting for him.

"Surprised, eh?" the Firstman demanded.

"I'll bet you want me to quit test-flying," Mayhem said with a smile which, clearer than words, told the Firstman his advice would be rejected.

The Firstman smiled too. "Why, no, Mayhem. As a matter of fact, I want you to take one of the coffins into deep space."

"Maybe something's wrong

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with my hearing," Mayhem said.

"No. You heard it right. Of course, it's up to you. Everything you do, you volunteer."

"Let's hear it, Firstman."

So the Firstman of Neptune told Johnny Mayhem about *Mozart's Lady* which, six hours ago, had left Triton for Pluto's orbit with an eccentric wealthy widow, a hundred girls, and a desperate escaped killer.

"The only thing we have out here fast enough to overtake them, Mayhem, is the one-man coffins. The only man we have who can fly them is you. What do you say?"

Mayhem's answer was a question, but the question didn't really require an answer. Mayhem asked: "What are we waiting for?"

The Firstman grinned. He had expected such an answer, of course. The whole galaxy, let alone the solar system, knew the Mayhem legend. Every world which had an Earthman population and a Galactic League post, however small, had a body in cold storage, waiting for Johnny Mayhem if his services were required. But of course no one knew precisely when Mayhem's services might be required. No one knew exactly under what circumstances the Galactic League Council, operating from the hub of the Galaxy, might summon Mayhem. And only a very few people, including those at the Hub and the Galactic League Firstmen on civilized worlds and Observers on primitive worlds, knew the precise mechanics of Mayhem's coming.

Johnny Mayhem, a bodiless sentience. Mayhem — Johnny Marlow, then—who had been chased from Earth, a pariah and a criminal, eight years ago, who had been mortally wounded on a wild planet deep within the Saggitarian Swarm, whose life had been saved—after a fashion—by the white magic of that planet. Mayhem, doomed now to possible immortality as a bodiless sentience, an *elan*, which could occupy and activate a corpse if it had been frozen properly . . . an *elan* doomed to wander eternally because it could not remain in one body for more than a month without body and *elan* perishing. Mayhem, who had dedicated his strange, lonely life to the service of the Galactic League because a normal life and normal social relations were not possible for him . . .

"One thing, Mayhem," the Firstman said, now, on Neptune. "How much longer you have in that body of yours?"

"Five days. Possibly six."

"That doesn't give you much time. If you're caught out there when your month is up—"

"I won't be. We're wasting time talking about it."

"—it would mean your death."

"Then let's get started."

The Firstman stared at him levelly. "You're a brave man, Mayhem."

"Let's say I'm not afraid to

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die. I've been a living dead man for eight years. Come on."

One of the so-called coffins, a tiny one-man ship barely big enough for a prone man, food concentrates and water, was already waiting at the station spacefield.

Ten minutes after hearing about *Mozart's Lady*, without fanfare, Mayhem blasted off in pursuit.

Maintaining top speed all the way, House Bartock brought *Mozart's Lady* across almost two billion miles of space from Neptune's to Pluto's orbit in three days. He was delighted with the speed. It would have taken the average space-tub ten days to two weeks and, since as far as Bartock knew there were nothing but average space-tubs on Neptune, that gave him a considerable head-start.

It was Jane Cummings-First Violin who discovered Bartock's identity. Bartock was studying the star-map at the time and considered himself safe from discovery because he kept the control door of *Mozart's Lady* locked. However, Jane Cummings had established something of a liaison with the pilot outward bound from Earth and Mars, so she had been given a spare key which she'd kept, secretly, all the time the symphony was on Triton. Now, curious about the new pilot for the same reason that the miners on Triton had been curious about the symphony, Jane made her way forward, inserted her key in the lock, and pushed open the control door.

"Hello there," she said.

House Bartock whirled. The turning of a key in the lock had so unnerved him—it was the last thing he expected—that he forgot to shut off the star-map. Its tell-tale evidence glowed on the wall over his head.

"What do you want?" he managed to ask politely.

"Oh, just to say hello."

"You already said it."

Jane Cummings pouted. "You needn't bite my head off. What's your name? Mine's Jane, and I play the violin. It wouldn't hurt you to be polite."

Bartock nodded, deciding that a little small talk wouldn't hurt if he could keep the girl from becoming suspicious. That was suddenly important. If this girl had a key to the control room, for all he knew there could be others.

"My, you have been hurrying," Jane said. "I could tell by the acceleration. You must be trying to break the speed records or something. I'll bet we're almost to Earth—"

Her voice trailed off and her mouth hung open. At first Bartock didn't know what was the matter. Then he saw where she was staring.

The star-map.

"We're not heading for Earth!" she cried.

Bartock walked toward her. "Give me that key," he said. "You're going to have to stay

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here with me. Give me that key."

Jane backed away. "You—you couldn't be our pilot. If you were—"

"The key. I don't want to hurt you."

Bartock lunged. Jane turned and ran, slamming the door behind her. It clanged, and echoed. The echo didn't stop. Bartock, on the point of opening the door and sprinting down the companionway after her, stopped.

It wasn't the echo of metal slamming against metal. It was the radar warning.

Either *Mozart's Lady* was within dangerous proximity of a meteor, or a ship was following them.

Bartock ran to the radar screen.

The pip was unmistakable. A ship was following them.

A ship as fast—or faster—than *Mozart's Lady*.

Cursing, Bartock did things with the controls. *Mozart's Lady*, already straining, increased its speed. Acceleration flung Bartock back in the pilot's chair. Pluto loomed dead ahead.

Johnny Mayhem knew at what precise moment he had been discovered, for suddenly the speed of *Mozart's Lady* increased. Since this had occurred an hour and a half after Mayhem had first got a clear pip of the bigger ship on his radar, it meant he'd been spotted.

Prone with his hands stretched forward in the coffin-like experimental ship, Mayhem worked the controls, exactly matching speed with *Mozart's Lady*.

He tried to put himself in the position of the escaped convict. What would he do? His best bet would be to swing in close around Pluto, as close as he dared. Then, on the dark side of the planet, to change his orbit abruptly and come loose of its gravitational field in a new direction. It was a dangerous maneuver, but since the escaped convict now knew for sure that the tiny ship could match the speed of *Mozart's Lady*, it was his only hope. The danger was grave: even a first-rate pilot would try it only as a last resort, for the gravitational pull of Pluto might upset *Mozart's Lady*'s orbit. If that happened, the best the convict could hope for was an emergency landing. More likely, a death-crash would result.

Seconds later, Mayhem's thinking was confirmed. *Mozart's Lady* executed a sharp turn in space and disappeared behind the white bulk of Pluto.

Mayhem swore and followed.

"He's trying to kill us all!"

"He doesn't know how to pilot a ship! We're helpless, helpless!"

"Do something, Mrs. Moriarity!"

"Now girls, whatever happens, you must keep calm. We can only assume that Jane was right about what she saw, but since none of us can pilot a spaceship, we'll have to bide our time . . ."

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"Bide our time!"

"We're all as good as dead!"

One of the girls began screaming.

Mrs. Moriarity slapped her. "I'm sorry, dear. I had to hit you. Your behavior bordered on the hysterical. And if we become hysterical we are lost, lost, do you understand?"

"Yes'm."

"Good. Then we wait and see what happens."

What was happening was an attempt at what test-pilots term planet-swinging. Moving in the direction of Pluto's orbit, *Mozart's Lady* swung in very close behind the planet. Then, as the rotation of Pluto on its axis hurled it forth again, as a slingshot hurls a pellet, *Mozart's Lady*'s rockets would alter the expected direction of flight. Unless a pursuing ship followed exactly the same maneuver, it would be flung off into space at top-speed in the wrong direction. It might be hours before the first ship's trail could be picked up again—if ever.

House Bartock, aware of all this—and one other factor—sat sweating it out at the controls.

The one other factor was closeness to Pluto. For if you got too close, and the difference was only a matter of miles covered in an elapsed time of mili-seconds, Pluto might drag you into a landing orbit. If that happened, traveling at tremendous speed, there'd be the double danger of overheating in the planet's atmosphere and coming down too hard. Either way the results could be fatal.

His hands sweating, Bartock struggled with the controls. Now already he could see Pluto bulking, its night-side black and mysterious, in the viewport. Now he could hear the faint shrill scream of its atmosphere. Now . . .

Trying to time it perfectly, he slammed on full power.

A fraction of a mili-second too late.

Mozart's Lady stood for an instant on its tail, shuddering as if it were going to come apart and rain meteoric dust over Pluto's surface. That had happened too in such a maneuver, but it didn't happen now.

Instead, *Mozart's Lady* went into a landing orbit.

But its speed was still terrific and, lowering, it whizzed twice around Pluto's fifteen thousand mile circumference in twenty minutes. Atmosphere screamed, the heat siren shrilled, and a cursing House Bartock applied the braking rockets as fast as he could.

Pluto's surface blurred in the viewport, coming closer at dizzying speed. Bartock stood *Mozart's Lady* on its tail a second time, this time on purpose.

The ship shuddered, and struck Pluto.

Bartock blacked out.

When Mayhem's radar screen informed him that *Mozart's Lady* had failed to break free of

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Pluto's field of gravity, Mayhem immediately went to work. First he allowed the tiny scout-ship to complete its planet-swing successfully, then he slowed down, turned around in deep space, and came back, scanning Pluto with radar scopes and telescope until he located the bigger ship. That might have taken hours or days ordinarily, but having seen *Mozart's Lady* go in, and having recorded its position via radar, Mayhem had a pretty good idea as to the landing orbit it would follow.

It took him three-quarters of an hour to locate the bigger ship. When he finally had located it, he brought it into close-up with the more powerful of the two telescopes aboard the scout.

Mozart's Lady lay on its side in a snow-tundra. It had been damaged, but not severely. Part of the visible side was caved in, but the ship had not fallen apart. Still, chances were that without extensive repairs it would not be able to leave Pluto.

There was no way, Mayhem knew, of making extensive repairs on Pluto. *Mozart's Lady* was there to stay.

The safe thing to do would be to inform Neptune and wait in space until the police cruisers came for House Bartock. The alternative was to planetfall near *Mozart's Lady*, take the convict into custody, and then notify Neptune.

If Bartock were alone the choice would have been an easy one. But Bartock was not alone. He had a hundred girls with him. He was desperate. He might try anything.

Mayhem had to go down after him.

The trouble was, though, that of all the worlds in the galaxy—not merely in Sol System—Pluto was the one most dangerous to Johnny Mayhem. He had been pursuing House Bartock for three days. Which meant he had two days left before it was imperative that he leave his current body. This would mean notifying the hub of the Galaxy by sub-space radio to pull out his *elan*, but Pluto's heavyside layer was the strongest in the solar system, so strong that sub-space radio couldn't penetrate it.

And that was not the only thing wrong with Pluto. It was, in fact, an incredible anomaly of a world. Almost four billion miles from the sun at its widest swing, it still was not too cold to support life. Apparently radioactive heat in its core kept it warm. It even had an Earth-type atmosphere, although the oxygen-content was somewhat too rich and apt to make you giddy. And it was a slow world.

Time moved slowly on Pluto. Too slowly. When you first landed, according to the few explorers who had attempted it, the native fauna seemed like statues. Their movement was too slow for the eye to register. That was lucky, for the fauna tended to be enormous and deadly. But after a while—how long a while

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Mayhem didn't know—the fauna, subjectively, seemed to speed up. The animals commenced moving slowly, then a bit faster, then normally. That, Mayhem knew, was entirely subjective. The animals of Pluto were not changing their rate of living: the visitor to Pluto was slowing down to match their laggard pace.

Two days, thought Mayhem. That was all he had. And, hours after he landed, he'd start to slow down. There was absolutely no way of telling how much time elapsed once that happened, for the only clocks that did not go haywire on Pluto were spring-wind clocks, and there hadn't been a spring-wind clock in the solar system for a hundred and fifty years.

Result? On Pluto Mayhem would slow down. Once he reached Pluto's normal time rate it might take him, say, ten minutes to run—top-speed—from point A to point B, fifteen yards apart. Subjectively, a split-second of time would have gone by in that period.

Two days would seem like less than an hour, and Mayhem would have no way of judging how much less.

If he didn't get off Pluto in two days he would die.

If he didn't land, House Bartock, growing desperate and trying to scare him off or trying to keep control of the hundred girls while he made a desperate and probably futile attempt to repair the damaged *Mozart's Lady*, might become violent.

Mayhem called Neptune, and said: "Bartock crash-landed on Pluto, geographical coordinates north latitude thirty-three degrees four minutes, west longitude eighteen degrees even. I'm going down. That's all."

He didn't wait for an answer.

He brought the space-bound coffin down a scant three miles from *Mozart's Lady*. Here, though, the tundra of Pluto was buckled and convoluted, so that two low jagged ranges of snow-clad hills separated the ships.

Again Mayhem didn't wait. He went outside, took a breath of near-freezing air, and stalked up the first range of hills. He carried a blaster buckled to his belt.

When he saw the scout-ship come down, Bartock didn't wait either. He might have waited had he known anything about what Pluto did to the time-sense. But he did not know. He only knew, after a quick inspection, that the controls of *Mozart's Lady* had been so badly damaged that repair was impossible.

He knew too that the scout-ship had reported his whereabouts. He had, on regaining consciousness, been in time to intercept the radio message. True, it would take any other Neptune-stationed ship close to two weeks to reach Pluto, so Bartock had some temporal leeway. But obviously whoever was pursuing him in the one-man

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ship had not come down just to sit and wait. He was out there in the snow somewhere. Well, Bartock would go out too, would somehow manage to elude his pursuer, to get behind him, reach the scout-ship and blast off in it. And, in the event that anything went wrong, he would have a hostage.

He went arearships to select one.

Went with his desperation shackled by an iron nerve.

And a blaster in his hand.

". . . very lucky," Matilda Moriarity was saying, trying to keep the despair from her voice. "We have some cuts and bruises, but no serious casualties. Why, we might have all been killed."

"Lucky, she says! We're marooned here. Marooned—with a killer."

Before the widow Moriarity could defend her choice of words, if she was going to defend them, House Bartock came into the rear lounge, where the entire symphony and its chaperone was located. They would have locked the door, of course; they had locked it ever since they had learned who Bartock was. But the door, buckled and broken, had been one of the casualties of the crash-landing.

"You," Bartock said.

He meant Jane Cummings.

"Me?"

"Yes, you. We're going outside."

"Out—side?"

"That's what I said. Let's get a move on."

Jane Cummings didn't move.

The widow Moriarity came between her and Bartock. "If you must take anyone, take me," she said bravely.

"The girl."

Still the widow Moriarity didn't move.

House Bartock balled his fist and hit her. Three of the girls caught her as she fell. None of them tried to do anything about Bartock, who had levelled his blaster at Jane Cummings.

Trembling, she went down the companionway with him.

A fierce cold wind blew as they opened the airlock door.

It looked like a sea-serpent floundering in the snow.

Only, it was caught in the act of floundering, like an excellent candid shot of a sea-serpent floundering in snow.

Its movements were too slow for Mayhem's eyes to register.

Which meant, he realized gratefully, that he hadn't begun to slow down yet.

He had to be careful, though. If he were Bartock he would make immediately for the scout-ship. It would be his only hope.

Realizing this, Mayhem had gone through deep snow for what he judged to be fifteen minutes, until he had reached a spine of rock protruding from the snow. Then he had doubled back, now leaving no footprints, along the spine. He was waiting in the first low range of hills not four hundred yards from the scout-ship, his blaster ready. When

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Bartock prowled into view, Mayhem would shout a warning. If Bartock didn't heed it, Mayhem would shoot him dead.

It seemed like an airtight plan.

And it would have been, except for two things. First, Bartock had a hostage. And second, Pluto-time was beginning to act on Mayhem.

He realized this when he looked at the sea-serpent again. The long neck moved with agonizing slowness, the great gray green bulk of the monster, sixty feet long, shifted slowly, barely perceptibly, in the snow. Mountains of powdery snow moved and settled. The spade-shaped head pointed at Mayhem. The tongue protruded slowly, hung suspended, forked and hideous, then slowly withdrew.

The neck moved again, ten feet long, sinuous. And faster.

Faster? Not really.

Mayhem was slowing down.

Then he saw Bartock and the girl.

They were close together. Bartock held her arm. Walking toward the scout-ship, they were too far away and too close together for Mayhem to fire. Bartock would know this and wouldn't heed any warning.

So Mayhem didn't give any warning. He left the spine of rock and rushed down through the snow toward the space-bound coffin.

A low rumble of sound broke the absolute stillness.

It was the monster, and now that his own hearing had slowed down, Mayhem was able to hear the slower cycles of sound. How much time had really passed? He didn't know. How much time did he have left before death came swiftly and suddenly because he had been too long in his temporary body? He didn't know that either. He sprinted toward the scout-ship. At least it felt like he was sprinting. He didn't know how fast he was really moving. But the sea-serpent creature was coming up behind him, faster. No place near what would have been its normal apparent speed, but faster. Mayhem, his breath coming raggedly through his mouth, ran as fast as was feasible.

So did Bartock and the girl.

It was Bartock, spotting Mayhem on the run, who fired first. Mayhem fell prone as the raw *zing* of energy ripped past. The sea-serpent-like-creature behind him bellowed.

And reared.

It didn't look like a sea-serpent any longer. It looked like a dinosaur, with huge solid rear limbs, small forelimbs, a great head with an enormous jaw—and speed.

Now it could really move.

Subjectively, time seemed normal to Mayhem. Your only basis was subjective: time always seemed normal. But Mayhem knew, as he got up and ran again, that he was now moving slower than the minute hand on a clock. Slower . . . as objective

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time, as measured in the solar system at large, sped by.

He tripped as the creature came behind him. The only thing he could do was prop up an elbow in the snow and fire. Raw energy ripped off the two tiny forelimbs, but the creature didn't falter. It rushed by Mayhem, almost crushing him with the hind limbs, each of which must have weighed a couple of tons. It lumbered toward Bartock and Jane Cummings.

Turning and starting to get up, Mayhem fired again.

His blaster jammed.

Then the bulk of the monster cut off his view of Bartock, the girl and the scout-ship. He heard the girl scream. He ran toward them.

Jane Cummings had never been so close to death. She wanted to scream. She thought all at once, hysterically, she was a little girl again. If she screamed maybe the terrible apparition would go away. But it did not go away. It reared up high, as high as a very tall tree, and its fangs were hideous.

Bartock, who was also frightened, raised his blaster, fired, and missed.

Then, for an instant, Jane thought she saw someone running behind the monster. He had a blaster too, and he lifted it. When he fired, there was only a clicking sound. Then he fired again.

Half the monster's bulk disappeared and it collapsed in the snow.

That was when Bartock shot the other man.

Mayhem felt the stab of raw energy in his shoulder. He spun around and fell down, his senses whirling in a vortex of pain. Dimly he was aware of Bartock's boots crunching on the snow.

They fired simultaneously. Bartock missed.

And collapsed with a searing hole in his chest. He was dead before he hit the snow.

The girl went to Mayhem. "Who—who are you?"

"Got to get you back to the ship. No time to talk. Hurry."

"But you can't walk like that. You're badly hurt. I'll bring help."

". . . dangerous. I'll take you."

He'd take her, flirting with death. Because, for all he knew, his time on Pluto, objectively, had already totalled forty-eight hours. If it did, he would never live to get off Pluto. Once his thirty days were up, he would die. Still, there might be danger from other animals between the scout-ship and *Mozart's Lady*, and he couldn't let the girl go back alone. It was almost ludicrous, since she had to help him to his feet.

He staggered along with her, knowing he would never make it to *Mozart's Lady* and back in time. But if he left her, she was probably doomed too. He'd sacrifice his life for hers . . .

They went a hundred yards, Mayhem gripping the blaster and advancing by sheer effort of

(Continued on page 131)

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Holly's scientist-father died and left her his love and the unfinished results of his genius—a bequest that proved to be a——

LEGACY OF TERROR

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

HOLLY KENDALL hated the embalmer for his art. She looked at the dead face of her father as he lay in his bier, and she wanted to reach over and gently prod his shoulder until he wakened and smiled at her.

Then, for the first time since she had learned the shocking news of his death, she broke down and cried.

It was almost three weeks later before she became accustomed to the idea of a world without Professor John Kendall's tall, stooped figure. It was only then that Price, her father's attorney, was able to make her sit still and

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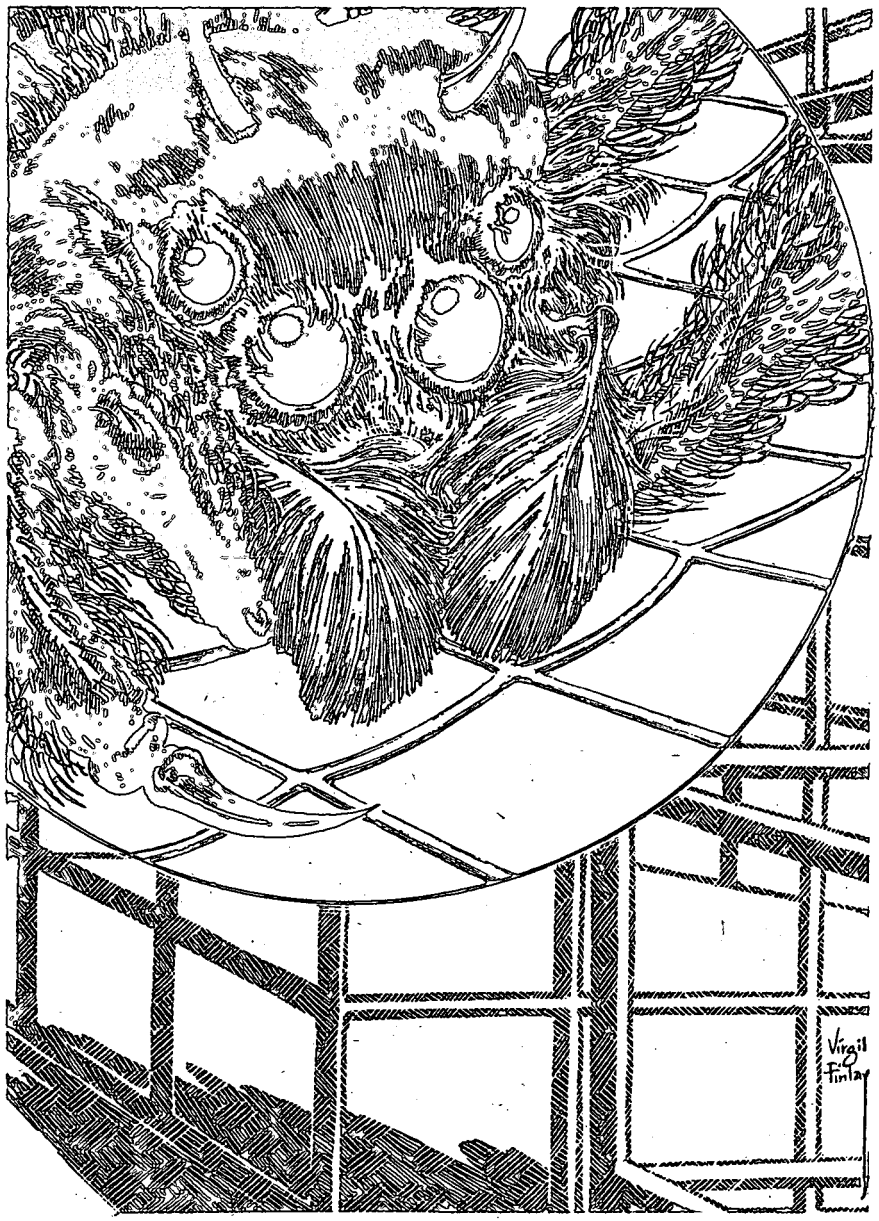

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listen to the dry, unemotional facts of her future.

"Now as to money," he said, clearing his throat. "I needn't tell you that your father wasn't a rich man. He swallowed up whatever annuities he had in his research, just as he swallowed up those university grants of his. The lawyer, a plump, sober man, looked mildly disapproving. "So I'm afraid you won't have more than your father's insurance money, which will be very little."

"Do you think I really care?" Holly whispered.

"No, no, of course not. I just wanted you to know the facts. However, there *is* a legacy of some kind, but I can't begin to appraise its value. I'd suggest you have some reputable—"

Holly glanced up. "What legacy?"

"His laboratory. The house and the laboratory he maintained in Vermont, including whatever furniture, fixtures, and equipment remaining from his experiments. I've already received some inquiries, both from the university and from private research organizations, and if you're interested, I'll arrange for them to contact you. Perhaps you might be able to make a favorable—"

"No," Holly said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I can't sell father's laboratory, Mr. Price, you know that. He spent more years of his life there than anywhere else."

The lawyer grunted. "If you have some idea, Miss Kendall, of maintaining a sort of shrine—"

"I don't know what my idea is. I—I've never even seen the place. Father never let me near it. Not even mother was allowed there; I suppose that was one of the reasons she left him eventually—"

"Yes," Mr. Price said vaguely. "But I assure you, Miss Kendall, there probably is no *intrinsic* value in the place. So if I were you . . ."

"You're not me, Mr. Price. I want to go there, see the place, perhaps live in it. Then I'll decide what's to be done with it."

He sighed. "Very well, Miss Kendall; you know your own mind."

He opened the top drawer of his desk and removed a small brown envelope. There were three keys inside, and he dropped them on the desk blotter.

"One of these keys is to the house," he said. "Another is to his laboratory. And the

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third—" He scratched his chin. "I can't tell you for certain. In your father's will, he mentions a strongbox; I would presume this may open it. Perhaps you'll find some securities or even cash; indeed, I hope so."

"When—when can I go there?"

"You may take actual possession as soon as the will is probated. There'll be a formal reading on Thursday—"

"Couldn't I go now? Just to look around?"

Mr. Price shrugged. "If you want to."

Holly Kendall stood up, an unusually tall girl with a lithe body, and a face that would have been strikingly lovely except for a chin too determined.

"I'll go at once," she said, taking the keys and dropping them into her purse.

The trees along the Vermont roadway had been baked brown in an August hotter and stickier than most. At the wheel of her car, Holly Kendall felt stifled by the oppressive weather, despite the abbreviated shorts and light cotton sweater she wore. Her father's house, tucked deep into a hillside eighteen miles off the main highway, was accessible only through tortuous side roads, and the wear and tear on the car and herself was considerable. Every now and then, she pulled onto the shoulder of the road, and simply waited until her strength returned.

The waiting made her think, and her thoughts were of her father.

It was surprising how much affection she felt for the old man, and how little she actually knew of him. As a child, she had seen him only sporadically; there was always some project which took him away from home, some scientific conference, some hush-hush experiment in his Vermont retreat. Her mother, now dead, had despaired of the life Professor Kendall led her, and divorced him when Holly was nine. He had tried to remain a father to her, but he was a scientist first. Yet his frequent absences made his infrequent visits all the sweeter; her heart grew fonder and fonder of the tall, gentle man with his soft voice and distant eyes.

And then, after a separation of over four years, the news had come. Professor John Kendall had been found dead in his own laboratory; the tired old body at last relieved from earthly suffering.

It was almost dusk by the

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time Holly reached the last leg of her journey. Another three miles, through crude woodland paths barely wide enough for her auto, would bring her to the door of her father's home and laboratory.

She stopped the car in a shaded grove, resting before making the final effort. She was tired, thirsty, and drowsy in the heat. She shut her eyes, and let her hands slide off the wheel into her lap, leaning her head back on the car cushion.

She only half-heard the chirping noise in the woods, a sound like crickets. It was only when the sound magnified, and the thrashing began in the forest, that she remembered that crickets were nocturnal creatures.

She opened her eyes, and saw the brambles part before her.

The thing that emerged was too incredible a sight for her mind to encompass; she stared at it without comprehension, even without fear, until it came closer. Then, as the glossy black body, with its great glistening bulges and waving antennae, approached the car, she screamed in a crescendo of terror that made the creature halt. She had to force her unwilling muscles to respond to the demands of her fear; she crashed out of the automobile and began to run on legs that wouldn't cooperate, away from the impossible horror that watched her flight with detached interest in its enormous protruding eyes. It was only when she had staggered off half a mile down the road that she realized what the thing had been. It was an ant—a monstrous, six-foot ant, a black nightmare that had somehow escaped into the waking world.

Sobbing, she stumbled along the dust-laden road in the fast-approaching twilight, praying for help to come. It came, but almost half an hour later, in the form of a distant vehicle.

She waved her arms frantically until the car stopped. It was a jeep, so battered that it might have been a war relic, and the driver was a young man in a khaki shirt. He was grinning impishly as he stopped; Holly's appearance had that effect on young men. But when he saw her face, and the obvious distress in her eyes, the grin faded.

"Something wrong?" he said. "You look scared—"

She gasped, and pointed back down the road.

"Over there—"

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"Take it easy. Catch your breath and then tell me. Did your car break down?"

She shook her head.

"Well, what was it then?"

"Ant," she managed to say. "Horrible thing—came out of the woods—" She looked at his puzzled face, and realized how her words must sound. But instead of incredulity, his face showed instantaneous interest.

"Did you say *ant?* Climb in!"

"No!" She shrank from his arm, but he pulled her into the car. They started down the road, heading right back to the scene she had tried to escape. "I don't want to go back," Holly said. "Please—"

But the young man, his eyes intent, kept his foot on the accelerator until they were in sight of the grove, and her deserted auto. He braked sharply, and then reached into a cluttered back seat for a Winchester. Then he hopped out and walked slowly towards the car.

"Be careful!" Holly cried.

A moment later, he said: "Nothing here. Come on and have a look."

Nervously, Holly obeyed. The car was sitting in the grove, just where she had left it. There was no sign of anything more menacing than a ladybug crawling across the seat cover.

"I *did* see it," she said defensively. "I swear I did. It was a giant ant, five or six feet tall. It was awful! He came out of the woods there—"

"I believe you," the young man said quietly.

She looked at him deliberately for the first time. He was taller than she was, and that was surprising. Holly was five-feet-eleven in her stocking feet, and accustomed to looking at the part in men's hair. He wasn't handsome, but you couldn't help being attracted to his wide, boyish grin, or being respectful to the steady, penetrating gaze of his deep brown eyes. He was tanned, and the grin he gave her flashed white against his skin.

"I do believe you," he said. "My name's Bryce Cooper; I've been looking for these big bugs for the past month. This is about as close as I came."

"You—you're looking for them?"

"That's right. I'm an associate professor at the university; English Lit's my racket, but I got me a degree in entymology, too. So when I picked up reports of king-sized spiders and stuff in the vicinity,

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I thought I'd take a look for myself. I've been just about ready to quit, and call it hallucinations, until you came along." He looked down at her, and his eyes were brightly inquiring.

"You said *them*. You mean there are more than—than this ant?"

"Never heard about any ant. Some farmer over in Ridgefield claimed that a giant bumblebee attacked one of his fieldhands. The hand corroborated the story, but he's sort of a village idiot. Then some nice old lady found a spider the size of a breadbox in her attic. She hit it with a broom, and it got away. Couple of more stories like that have gone around; naturally, I had to get nosey."

"But where do they come from? What are they?"

He shrugged. "Don't ask me; I've never seen one of the jolly beasts. I'm glad *you* did, though; that sort of gives me hope. Now would you describe our ant friend for me?"

She did, to the best of her uneasy recollection. Then, in answer to his question, told him the reason for her trip.

"So you're John Kendall's daughter!" he said, more avidly interested than before.

"That's right."

"Your father was a great man; I guess I don't have to tell you that. And he was a hell of a nice guy, too. I paid him a call, not too long ago."

"You saw my father?"

"Just for an hour or so. I stopped off at his house on my wandering search for our bug friends. He treated me real fine. It was a shock when I heard about—" He stopped.

"Yes," Holly said, turning away.

A moment later, Bryce Cooper touched her shoulder.

"Could I ask you something?"

"What?"

"Will you marry me?"

She turned to him, her eyes wide. "What was that?"

"Will you marry me? I'm twenty-nine, a bachelor, earn $5,120 a year, have regular habits, like good music, books—"

"Is that supposed to be funny?" Holly said stiffly.

"No, I mean it. I think it's about time I got married, man in my position. You're not only pretty, but you must be smart, being Kendall's daughter. Sounds like a good combination to me." He grinned winningly. "We can sit around on long, cold nights, and read the Science Journal—"

Holly couldn't help smiling. "You've got me wrong; I

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don't know a thing about science. I'm a script reader for a publishing company."

"I'll take the chance," Bryce said. "Maybe I can interest you in my bug collection—"

Holly shivered. "No, thank you. I don't want to see another bug for a long, long time. And as for marriage—I'll have to think that over." She climbed behind the wheel of her car, and then said, hesitantly: "Would you mind just following me for the next three miles? I don't think I can stand another encounter with that thing—"

Bryce grinned. "Lady, I'd follow you anywhere."

He hopped into his jeep, and trailed her down the winding, bumpy roads until they reached her destination.

Professor John Kendall's home wasn't visible until it loomed up suddenly out of the forest, and from the moment Holly saw its hot, corrugated steel roof, its rough stone siding and dirt-caked windows, she knew what her father's lawyer meant about "intrinsic" value. She got out of the car, not even aware of Bryce Cooper trailing behind her, and walked deliberately to the front door. The surrounding air was unnaturally silent, ominously heavy. She took the keys from her purse.

The second one unlatched the door. She paused before opening it, and turned to the man at her heels.

"Would you come in with me? I'm sort of jumpy."

"Delighted," Bryce said gallantly.

They went in together, and Bryce found a lightswitch beside the doorway. He flicked it, but nothing happened.

"Main power switch is off," he said.

But there was enough sun filtering through the dusty windows to enable them to see that the house was as bare and uninviting as a miner's shack. The few pieces of furniture scattered about the naked wood floor were rudimentary. The bedroom contained nothing more than a wooden foot locker and a narrow cot. The kitchen equipment was rusted and filthy; there was a colony of ants domesticating in the sink. Holly yelped when she saw them, and almost fell into Bryce's arms. He didn't seem to mind.

"No Buckingham Palace," he said wryly. "Your father didn't go much for interior decoration."

"He was a scientist," Holly said, flushing. "What did he

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care for fancy furniture?"

"But you're a lady," Bryce said delicately. "And maybe you care, just a little. You really plan to spend the night here?"

"Of course!"

She went through the kitchen, towards a blank metal door at the end of the hallway.

"This must be the entrance to his lab," she said.

Bryce rapped it with his palm. "Steel," he grunted. "Wonder what he needed a steel door for?"

"I'm sure he had good reasons."

"That's just what worries me."

She put the first key in the lock, and the door yielded. But her footsteps halted at the doorsill, and Bryce volunteered: "I'll go in first."

She tried not to appear grateful for his offer. The truth was, Holly was enjoying her sense of feminine helplessness; a girl her size didn't get that many chances.

Bryce strolled in, tried a lightswitch again, with no result.

"No light here either. But you can see enough."

She came into the room, and saw what was to be seen. It was a bare, white room, but here the barrenness contributed to a look of sterile cleanliness. There was a workbench with odd mechanical and chemical paraphanalia, all in orderly arrangement. One side of the room was taken up by a steel cabinet with glass doors tall enough to admit a man taller than Bryce; the other side of the room contained empty wire cages of varying sizes.

"What was your father working on?" Bryce said wonderingly, peering about in bewilderment.

"I don't know. He never told me; perhaps he never told anyone."

She walked to the cabinet, and looked through the glass doors. There was nothing to see inside. Bryce came to her, and fiddled with a pair of handles at the side of the huge cabinet. The handles gave to his touch, and he uncovered a panel of dials and guages.

"It's some kind of machine," he grunted.

"What kind?"

"Search me." He bent closer, but the room had grown too dark to allow a careful examination. "I better go find that main power switch; it'll be night in another half hour."

He went out the doorway again, but as Holly watched

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his retreating figure, a sound at the laboratory window made them both whirl towards its source. The sight that met their eyes froze them into horrified immobility, and Holly Kendall produced her second ear-splitting shriek of the day. It was an angry insect almost a foot long, and its great, hulking striped body thudded against the window frames as if attempting to shatter the glass. She screamed again, and Bryce ran towards the window, in time for the gargantuan bee to buzz its frustration and disappear from their sight.

"Oh, my Lord!" Holly sobbed. "What *was* it, Bryce?"

"A bee, so help me. Biggest damn bee I ever saw in my life—"

She was in his arms by this time, her head against his chest, her body trembling. He patted her shoulder, and said: "Look, I'm going to try and track that baby down. It's about time I hauled one of those things in—"

"No!" She held on to him fiercely. "Don't leave me!"

"I'll be back in a minute—"

"Please, Bryce!"

He sighed. "Okay, Miss Kendall, if that's what you want. But you've just made me miss the opportunity of a lifetime. Not that *this* is so bad." He grinned, and she moved away from him, discovering that she could still blush hotly. Then Bryce Cooper's mood changed. "Say, listen," he said. "You're not thinking what *I'm* thinking, are you?"

"What?"

"That these insects, and your father's lab—maybe they're connected?"

"It couldn't be! My father was a chemist, and a physicist. He couldn't have anything to do with them."

"What makes you so sure? He might have been working with endocrinology or something. How about those empty cages? They could have held anything. Maybe even our bee—"

"That's ridiculous!"

"Why?"

"I—I don't know." She looked at her hand. She still held the key ring in her fingers.

"What's the third key for?" Bryce said shrewdly.

"A strongbox. There was supposed to be a strongbox somewhere in the lab, and this is the key for it."

"Let's have a look. Maybe there's a clue in it."

Their search didn't last

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long. On the table, beside a rack of test tubes, there was a small green-metal box.

Holly tried the key, and it opened. She lifted the cover carefully.

"It's a book," she said, disappointed.

But Bryce seemed excited. "No, it's not. It's a journal; maybe a record of your father's work. That could tell us what this is all about." He picked it up, but the girl snatched it from his grasp in one quick movement.

"It'll tell *me*," she said firmly. "I don't remember inviting you to read it."

"I only thought—"

"You thought wrong. If this is a record of my father's work, then it's strictly private."

Bryce Cooper frowned. "Okay, if that's how you want it. Then I guess here's where I bow out." He started for the door, but Holly's hand detained him.

"No, wait," she said shyly. "I didn't mean for you to go."

"Sorry. Ought to be pretty boring around here now, with you nosing around that book. I'll be on my way."

"But I'm frightened. All those horrible insects around the place—"

"Courage, Holly," he said, patting her hand.

"Oh, all right! We'll *both* read it, if you insist."

Bryce looked happy. "Swell. So tell you what I'll do in return. Suppose I take my stuff out of the jeep, including my trusty Winchester, and we play house for a while? We can build ourselves a fire in that fireplace in the living room, if the chimney's working. And I've got some groceries in back that may be enough to make a decent meal. Okay?"

"Okay," Holly whispered.

He went outside; a few minutes later, the lights went on in the room as he located the main power switch.

An hour later, they turned to the first page of Dr. John Kendall's journal.

June 24. Today I embark on an exploration into a mystery greater than the atom, and perhaps more devastating in its consequence.

It is a journey into a realm few have traveled; indeed, few believe the realm actually exists. But if my premises are correct, and if my experiments are conclusive, then I will have unlocked a door to a secret that will alter the course of human thought and destiny as no prior discovery has done. I seek to define the material boundaries of the

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human spirit; I seek a scientific basis for the soul.

My colleagues will argue my choice of words; I can foresee their bickering now. They will claim that I have overstepped the province of science, and am trespassing in a domain which rightfully belongs to religion. But whether "soul" is the definition for the mysterious essence I am exploring is merely a question of semantics. For my purposes, and the purposes of this journal, I shall use the word without apology. For when I conducted my first transmigration experiment at the university, and successfully transplanted the behavior, instincts, and personality of a common housefly into the body of a beetle—what else was it that made the journey from one organism to another, if not a "soul"?

But now I am prepared for larger, and more conclusive experiments. Now I have the experience, the equipment with which to test my findings to the nth degree, to a point where I may offer the world unshakable proof of their validity. It will be demonstrated for all to see.

Tomorrow, I begin my work. I have prepared the hamster for his voyage into the body of a fat, placid spider who awaits his fate innocently in the wire cage.

June 25. I am overwhelmed; not by the ability which I have displayed in my laboratory today, but by the great natural forces which underlie the success of my experiment. The equipment operated without fault; within less than an hour, the hamster lay lifeless on the floor of the transmigration apparatus, in a state that must, by all scientific precedent, be called death. But is it really dead? This answer I do not know.

As for the spider, it is very much alive. It emerged from the coma-like state which the process induces and began to move frantically inside its steel prison. It is obvious that its movements are no longer that of its species. Its struggles to batter its way out of the cage, its inability to climb, indicate that the transference has indeed been made.

A few minutes ago, before retiring, I looked in on my transformed spider once more, and detected a phenomenon which troubles me. I am not sure of my ability to judge, but it seems to have enlarged in size. Will this be a side-effect of the process, as I once feared. Will there be physical as well as psychologi-

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cal changes in the creatures possessed? I must watch my spider carefully.

June 28. There can no longer be any doubt: the spider is twice its normal size now, and the period of growth does not seem to have ended. How large will it become? Will it emerge a grotesque monster which will have to be destroyed for reasons of common safety? Or will it approximate the size of the hamster, whose soul now occupies its body?

I have been working steadily with the hamster these past two days, making attempts at resuscitation. All my efforts have failed; I begin to detect signs of decay in the body. There seems to be no choice but to believe that when the soul goes, the body must follow—just as the reverse is true in life.

Tomorrow, I will conclude my series of chemical experiments with the hamster; if they fail, I will make no further attempts to bring it back to life. Later, after I have satisfied myself that the process is failure-proof, I will attempt to reverse the transmigration procedure, attempt to return the soul of these creatures to their original bodies.

But there is still another great mystery to which I seek the key. What became of the soul of the spider, when its body was occupied by the invading hamster? What effect was created upon the possessed? Is it sharing its body and its personality, side-by-side with the hamster? Has it lost its own identity and instincts? Is there a war raging inside the spider's body, a war for control? I am tantalized and baffled by this puzzle; perhaps future work will reveal the clue.

July 2. A calamity! The spider has escaped its cage. I wouldn't have believed it capable of the strength. When I discovered the mangled, twisted bars this morning, I was nearly hysterical, both with disappointment at my loss and with fear that my experiments might draw undue attention from a suddenly terrorized community. Not that the spider would knowingly harm anyone—I have fed it from my own hand, lettuce and other vegetables, better suited to the diet of the hamster who now lies dead and buried in the woods. It's as gentle as the hamster, but the very sight of its grotesque body will be enough to rouse the countryside. But what can I do? I cannot stop now

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to conduct a long search for the creature; I am preparing for the new experiment in the morning. I must only wait, and pray, and be thankful if the poor beast wandered off to die unseen in some ditch or gully.

I must continue my glandular studies; there must be some way to prevent the uncharacteristic growth which seems to take place once soul-transference is made. There is danger in this growth. Every creatures's size is determined by the nature of its physique; even though the spider's body appeared to have altered somewhat in weight distribution, it cannot survive this exorbitant growth without gravity taking its toll, without dying of its own insupportable weight. Or are the changes which take place enough to sustain its life? There is so much to be answered!

July 5. A woman in the town of Ridgefield has reported my spider. I can be grateful that her age and reputation for senility prevented widespread belief in her story. She located the creature in her attic, weaving a gigantic web, thick as rope; or at least, this was her story. She attacked it with a broom, and it climbed from the dormer window and disappeared into the woods surrounding the house. Her tale has interested some of the younger men of the town, and there has been talk of calling the city newspapers. But I can see that I have no real need for concern, not unless the beast makes another and more public appearance.

Yet I am disturbed by the details of her account presuming it was accurate. If the spider is climbing, and spinning its web, then its actions are no longer hamster-like, then the spider "soul" is once more dominant.

Will I ever know what truly happens as a result of this transference? Or am I merely a conjuror, making genies appear by rubbing a lamp, a lamp whose inner mechanism will never be revealed to me?

This morning's experiment appears to be completely successful. The cat lies dead in its cage; I will not even attempt to revivify it. But the bumblebee is alive and thriving, and already seems to have lost the knowledge that it can fly.

July 6. I am tired. My futile attempts to reverse the transmigration process has wearied me; I have worked

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for fourteen hours with no tangible result. I am forced to conclude that this is a one-way process, resulting in death to the body of the organism whose soul is transferred to another. It lives on, of course, but sharing the body of its host. Here is where the real core of the secret lies, in learning what becomes of the soul after its entry, in determining the fate of the host's own soul. This is a mystery I must unravel, or I have only scratched the surface of my exploration, only performed an astonishing trick for the amusement of the public and the scientific world. I must learn the answer!

This afternoon, a report reached me that my giant spider had been seen again, this time climbing into a sewerage drain. The hamster would not have sought this kind of refuge; has its soul departed, leaving only its size as a reminder of its presence?

July 8. The monstrous bumblebee crashed from its cage this morning and attacked me, literally attacked me! I am more astonished than hurt, more frightened by the significance of the act than by the personal shock it gave me. The bee is now the size of the cat whose soul occupied it, but it has regained its knowledge of flight. Yet the cat was a gentle creature; it would never have demonstrated such violence and belligerency. The bee itself is not an aggressive insect, unless thwarted. Perhaps that is why it attacked me; perhaps the bee-soul has dominated once more. I am bewildered and confused, and suddenly helpless at the consequences of my own work. I can no longer fathom the behavior of the creatures I have created; I don't know what happens to them once the transmigration process is made. Does the conflict inside the shared body create savagery, violence? Is it a totally *new* kind of creature that emerges from the amalgam? Will I ever know? *Can* I ever know?

Later. I have been dozing, and the answer came to me as if from a dream. Of course, there is only one way to learn the truth. I must make the transmigration journey myself . . .

Here the journal ended.

Holly closed the book and stared dumbly at the tight-lipped young man in the wooden chair by the fireplace. She felt numb.

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"Oh, my God," she said quietly, flatly.

"So that's how it happened," Bryce Cooper said. "He must have been conducting the final experiment when his heart gave out. Or maybe the shock of the transmigration itself was too much for him . . ."

The girl was shaking her head, unable to speak.

"Take it easy," Bryce said solicitously. "You've got to be sensible about this."

"He's not dead," Holly Kendall said.

"What?"

"Don't you see? My father's not dead."

"Now, look. Don't go getting any wild ideas because of what that book says. Didn't you see your father before they—" He paused. "Well, didn't you go to the funeral? You knew he was dead."

"Yes. But maybe they buried just his body—maybe his soul—"

Bryce stood up and began pacing the floor, the old, rotting boards creaking beneath his heavy feet.

"I wouldn't go off on the deep end about this," he said. "I know that journal makes his death sound suspicious, but you don't have any evidence. Wouldn't he have made an entry in the book about an experiment involving himself?"

"I—I guess he would," Holly admitted.

"Sure, he would. But he didn't. That sounds to me like he didn't get to his experiment before his death." He took the journal from her limp hands and flipped to the last entry. "The last date he gives is July 8. Now—what was the date of his death?"

"I'm not sure. They found his body on the fourteenth of July, but they weren't sure when he had died, exactly."

She had grown increasingly paler as the reading of the journal had progressed; now Holly looked ghost-like in the flickering light of the log fire.

"Well, it just doesn't make sense to think what you're thinking, Holly. For one thing, he would have made copious notes about any experiment in which he was the *chief participant*; any scientist would do that much. Secondly, if he had actually occupied the body of some—some animal—then he would have come forward by now, to show himself." Bryce ran his fingers wildly through his hair. "This is all so crazy. I can't really believe that he did all this—"

Holly whirled on him. "You think my father was a liar?"

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"No, no, I didn't say that! But it's so hard to get used to the idea—"

"But you saw the bee for yourself — that awful bee! And then there was the ant—" Her eyes widened, and she put her hands to her throat. "The ant," she said again. "He doesn't mention the ant. It might have been—might have—oh, no! Oh, Lord, no!"

"Holly!"

She was on her feet, swaying, her eyes focused nowhere.

"The ant," she said, in a deathly monotone. "Six feet tall . . . like father . . ."

"Don't talk like that!"

"Father!" Holly Kendall screamed, and then began a wild laugh that ended in a paroxysm of hysteria, a spell that wasn't broken until Bryce Cooper hurried to her side and slapped her hard across the cheek. Then she looked at him, her mouth pouting, and her eyes rolled back into her head, leaving only whiteness. Her body melted into his arms, and consciousness left her.

When she awoke, it was morning.

She looked about the empty room, at the cold ashes in the fireplace, at the bright glare of daylight framed in the windows. When she realized that Bryce Cooper was no longer there, she fought the return of panic.

Ten minutes later, the sound of an auto engine rumbling to a halt brought her to the door. She opened it, and saw Bryce climbing out of the jeep. He took a crate from the back of the car, and grinning, carried it to the doorstep.

"Morning!" he said cheerfully. "Thought I'd get us some breakfast, while you had your beauty sleep. Found a farmhouse down the road; freshest eggs you ever saw, had to practically fight the chickens for 'em."

"What — what happened last night?" Holly said.

"Well, it was pretty compromising," Bryce frowned, his eyes laughing. "Darn good thing we're engaged to be married; you know how people talk."

"Where did you sleep?"

"On the floor, of course. Be darned lucky if the termites didn't get into my head. Now lookout, gal, let's get these vittles on the stove."

After breakfast, shyly, Holly renewed the conversation of the night before. Bryce answered her fearful questions calmly, reassuringly.

"Now that's just plain sil-

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ly," he said, chomping toast. "The last thing your father would do would be to use an ant for his experiment. He was a scientist, remember? He wouldn't take such a ridiculous chance. If you ask me, he never *did* go through with it. And if I were you, that's what I'd believe until I knew different."

"I guess you're right," Holly said, watching him eat. "The whole thing seems silly now . . . in broad daylight."

"Sure it is." He waved his fork at her. "Say, I've got an idea for you. Going to the farmhouse, I passed the purtiest little babbling brook and hilltop you ever saw. Right off a bank calendar, so help me. How about you and me taking a little trip there?"

Holly hesitated.

Then: "All right, Bryce. I'd like that."

She did like it. The brook was barely more than a moist, crooked ditch, and the unspoiled hilltop was the hiding place of a wasp city. But they wandered about the sun-splashed countryside, feeling the comforting warmth of the bright, clear morning, and sensing the essential innocence of nature. For a moment, Holly discovered that she could still laugh and feel happy; when they sat beneath the sheltering branches of a huge oak tree, she discovered that young Bryce Cooper was good to look at and talk to and be with.

They sat there for almost two hours, and then Bryce moved closer and put one arm about her shoulders. She didn't resist, so he became bolder.

He kissed her. When they parted, he murmured: "Good little Hollyhocks . . ."

For a moment, she didn't react to the strange words that dropped from his lips. She knew there was a vague memory somehow connected with what he said, but the memory was as fleeting as the light clouds floating by overhead.

They walked back to the car, and she remembered.

"Hollyhocks . . ." she whispered.

"What's that?"

"I—I was called that once. By my father, when I was a little girl."

"Name suits you," he chuckled. "Mind if I call you that too—sometimes?" He tried to kiss her again, but she pulled away from him. "Hey, what's the matter? My charm wear off already?"

"It's not that. I—I'm just tired."

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"Think you better start making plans. I don't know if you should spend much more time in that place. What with all those screwy bugs around here—"

"I'll see," Holly said. "But I want to go back now, Bryce. Please."

At her father's house, Holly and Bryce Cooper made another inspection of the premises, searching for further clues to the incredible experiments which had taken place inside the strange steel machine against the laboratory wall. There was nothing else: no more papers, or notes, or data of any kind.

"It's no use," Holly sighed. "I'll have to turn over the journal to the university, or to some of father's colleagues. They'll know best what to do about all this."

"Good idea," Bryce said. "No use getting more involved then you have to. Besides, I want to see what happens when they hear about *this* little research project. Ought to be plenty of fireworks."

"Let's go, Bryce," Holly said, heading for the door of the laboratory.

They went back into the main room, and saw the head of a giant ant in the front window.

Holly made a sound that might have been an aborted scream. Bryce pushed her behind him rudely, saying: "Back into the lab. He may not have seen us—"

The head of the creature was gone from the window.

"Oh, Bryce," Holly whispered.

"It's all right. I don't think he means any harm. And if he does—" He looked into the room, where his Winchester stood propped against the mantle of the fireplace, close enough if needed.

They waited another long minute.

"He might have left for good," the man said.

Holly trembled against him.

Then the door of the house exploded open, torn from its very hinges, landing with a crash against the floorboards!

Holly screamed, full-throated, reckless with fear, as the enormous glossy body stood silhouetted in the doorway, its great bulging eyes examining them, its antennae waving curiously. Bryce shouted something, and then plunged straight for the creature, waving his arms. When it didn't react, he veered sharply towards the fireplace, and scooped up the rifle in his hand. He fell to his knees and

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cocked it in a lightning motion.

The giant ant took a step forward, and to the accompaniment of Holly Kendall's strangled gasp of horror, the rifle cracked loudly and sent a bullet into the creature's bulky torso. It continued to advance, and another shot struck the head, bringing a spurt of blood. The third shot halted it, and the ant collapsed in a strange dance of slow-motion death. It fell to the floor and lay silent.

The tableau remained fixed until Bryce Cooper got to his feet and approached the body. He recoiled when the reek of the dead creature seemed to hit his nostrils; then he turned to look at Holly.

She was staring at him, staring at the smoking weapon in his hand.

"What have you done?" she said.

"Huh?"

"What did you do?" Holly said, in a rising inflection. "Why did you kill him?"

"Are you serious?"

"It—it might have been—" She put her hand to her cheek and swayed; she would have fallen if Bryce didn't reach her side in time to support her. "Let go of me," she said faintly. "Let go of me . . . you murderer . . ."

"Holly, snap out of it!"

"You killed him," she said dreamily. "You killed my father . . ."

"It's not your father!" he said angrily. "It's some poor tragic creation, that's all it is. Get that crazy idea out of your head . . ."

"Oh, Bryce!"

She began to cry, in a childlike wail that ended in deep, heaving sobs against his chest. He held her that way until the tears subsided; then he led her gently toward the bedroom of her father's house.

"You lie down and take it easy," he said. "I'll get rid of that—that thing in the living room. Then, after you feel better, we'll get started."

"All right," Holly said weakly, collapsing on the cot.

She closed her eyes, and found the darkness comforting. After a while, the light came, like sun behind clouds, and she saw her mother in a long blue gown. Her mother's voice was faint and almost indiscernible, but she knew that she spoke words of love. Shortly after, she saw the tall, stooped figure of her father approach her mother's side, and he kissed her gently on the cheek. Holly felt a surge of sudden happiness as she witnessed the scene; she

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wanted to run towards them and be a part of their tender moment. She tried, but her legs wouldn't make the journey. "Father," she called. "Father, come get me." He smiled, and approached her. But as he approached, his figure wavered oddly, blurring in the peculiar light that was flooding her dream, becoming black and glossy and strangely configured. Then she knew that it was no longer her father, but a dreadful thing with bulging eyes and waving antennae. She wanted to cry out, but her throat was stopped. She struggled to speak, to move, but nothing happened. With a final desperate effort, she forced herself out of the darkness and into the light, the real light of her dead father's house. She opened her eyes with a start.

"Hollyhocks," he said.

"Father! Why didn't you come and get me?" she asked.

"I don't understand you, Hollyhocks."

She turned to look at his face, but didn't see it. Instead, she saw Bryce Cooper bending over her.

"Bryce—"

"What is it, dear? Did I frighten you? I know it's strange for you, seeing me like this. But I had to do it, you understand that. You read my journal; you know what a problem I faced."

"Bryce, what are you talking about?"

He laughed. "It was really terribly convenient; I don't know when providence dealt more kindly with me. Not two days after I decided that self-experimentation was the only answer, this young man came wandering by . . ."

She sat up, her eyes round with bewilderment. "I don't understand. What's happened to you? What are you saying?"

"Let me finish, Hollyhocks, you shouldn't interrupt Daddy this way. But then, you always were an impetuous child." He smiled, and touched her hand. His skin was cold. "Anyway, it was a lucky circumstance for me. The young man was an associate professor from the university, on summer leave. He heard about my giant insects, and was investigating the vicinity. Naturally, I invited him in, and we talked. It was most interesting; he knew a great deal about entymology; I myself knew very little."

She tried to rise, but his hand held her firmly pinned to the cot.

"After we talked for a while, I offered him a drink.

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It was the simplest thing in the world to make his drink especially potent, potent enough to induce a deep and lasting sleep that would permit me to conclude my experiment in the only manner possible—with myself as subject. I had to *know*, darling, don't you see that? I had to know what happened when this transmigration took place, I had to learn for myself what occurred in both consciousnesses.

"I chose another human, of course; that was the only sensible path. My own body would be dead, deserted, useless; but I would be occupying a new body, and a body with human intelligence. Together we could lift the veil on the secret. I chose Mr. Cooper; or more exactly, Mr. Cooper chose me." He laughed again, more loudly, in a voice like her father's, yet strangely distorted.

"No," Holly whispered. "NO, it can't be . . ."

"The experiment was a total success. The equipment operated automatically and without failure. Within an hour, I was looking at my own dead body in the cabinet, and flexing the muscles of a stranger. I found myself in complete possession—there was no hint that Bryce Cooper had ever occupied the body that was now mine. I felt that the evacuation of his soul had been complete; that I was fully master.

"But I was wrong," he said sadly. "I know now that I was merely sharing, and that the soul of Bryce Cooper was struggling to reassert itself all the time. I fought it, fought hard, but at last was unable to resist. I gave in, Hollyhocks. It was no worse than falling asleep. Not like death, not at all; because I knew that I would awake again, awake and take control. And perhaps next time, I would not be toppled from my throne again . . ."

He was stroking her hair, as if she were a child.

"You're not my father," Holly whispered. "You're mad. You're not Daddy . . ."

"But of course I am, baby. You know that. I'm John Kendall." He chuckled, but without humor. "John Kendall, chemist, physicist, professor, father, scientist—John Kendall, the immortal . . ."

For the first time, she saw the unholy glitter of his eyes.

"You're mad," Holly said, the world spinning.

"Mad? An interesting conclusion, Hollyhocks. I can't

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argue with you, darling, I'm in no mood. I'm too happy now, too filled with joy at the prospects ahead. Can't you see them, Hollyhocks? Life eternal . . . soul to soul . . . an endless chain of years lying before me like a great highway . . ."

His grip lightened on her hand, and Holly sprang from the cot and ran to the door of the bedroom, out into the main room, heading for the sanity of the sunlight, screaming . . .

"Holly! Hollyhocks! Come back!"

She shut her ears to the sound of his cries, and stumbled, sobbing, towards the autos waiting in the road. Her hand wrestled with the handle of her own car, but it resisted. Behind her, she heard the running footsteps of the tall man who was neither lover nor father nor . . .

"I said *Stop!*" the man cried.

She turned, and saw the rifle in his hands.

"Don't make me do it, darling," he said. "Don't make me do it, Hollyhocks . . ."

She stared at him, shaking her head.

"I can't help it, surely you must see that. I don't want this story told, baby, you can see how important it is to me. So come back to Daddy, Hollyhocks . . . come to Daddy . . ."

Slowly, cautiously, he approached.

"No!" Holly shouted, and yanked at the door handle until it yielded. The first shot from the rifle spanged against the fender.

"I'm sorry, baby, I'm really sorry," the man said, in her father's gentle voice.

Then he raised the rifle, and aimed carefully at her head.

They might have both heard the buzzing noise overhead, if their attention hadn't been so fixed upon their personal drama. It was the man who became aware of it first, and he jerked his head skywards to find its source. When he saw the gargantuan bee, with its enormous wingspread and bulging striped body, a small smile flitted across his face. But when the insect buzzed angrily and dived towards him, his expression changed and he lifted the rifle to fire an inaccurate shot in the air. For a moment, the bee was diverted; then it attacked again. Before he could raise the weapon, it was upon him. From its tail, the giant sting struck like a sword into his chest; he screamed more in

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fury than pain, and batted at the huge striped body with the butt end of the gun. The bee's gleaming, translucent wings went suddenly limp, and it crashed to the ground at his feet.

Holly watched the face of Bryce Cooper grow crimson, and then white, as the pain filled his body. She saw Bryce Cooper's hands clutching his chest, trying to pull the barb from his flesh. Then, with a cry of anger and hatred, he staggered forward and fell to the rough earth . . .

Father Danielson, grave of eye, but with a small, twisted smile on his face, folded his hands on his lap and looked across his study at the girl by the fireplace.

"So what is it you want me to tell you?" he asked in a quiet comforting manner.

"I—I wanted your advice, Father Danielson. I really didn't know where else to turn. I couldn't bring myself to turn my father's journal over to the university, until I felt sure I knew what I was doing."

"I see." The minister rubbed his chin. "You think because your father was investigating the human soul, that you needed the viewpoint of religion?"

Holly flushed. "I suppose so."

"And what did you expect me to say? That the soul should remain forever a mystery, God's mystery? That he should never have tampered with it, and that the fate he suffered was punishment?"

"It's what I think myself, Father," Holly said. She took the journal from her purse. "That's why I wanted you to tell me I was right—to destroy *this*."

She threw the book on the fire.

Father Danielson watched the flames scorch the cover for a moment, and then got up and retrieved Professor John Kendall's journal.

"You underestimate us," he said gently. "Do you think we have anything to fear from science? No, Holly; your way is wrong. Knowledge leads to understanding; we think understanding leads to God." He handed her the book. "Take this to your father's friends and colleagues, and tell them what you know. Let them carry on his work; let them explore the mystery until they find its key. God will bless them in their search for truth."

He walked her to the door, and she left. The sun was shining. THE END

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CRY FROM A FAR PLANET

By TOM GODWIN

ILLUSTRATOR MARTINEZ

The problem of separating the friends from the enemies was a major one in the conquest of space as many a dead spacer could have testified. A tough job when you could see an alien and judge appearances; far tougher when they were only whispers on the wind.

A smile of friendship is a baring of the teeth. So is a snarl of menace. It can be fatal to mistake the latter for the former.

Harm an alien being only under circumstances of self-defense.

TRUST NO ALIEN BEING UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.

—From *Exploration Ship's Handbook.*

HE LISTENED in the silence of the Exploration ship's control room. He heard nothing but that was what bothered him; an ominous quiet when there should have been a multitude of sounds from the nearby

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village for the viewscreen's audio-pickups to transmit. And it was more than six hours past the time when the native, Throon, should have come to sit with him outside the ship as they resumed the laborious attempt to learn each other's language.

The viewscreen was black in the light of the control room, even though it was high noon outside. The dull red sun was always invisible through the world's thick atmosphere and to human eyes full day was no more than a red-tinged darkness.

He switched on the ship's outside floodlights and the viewscreen came to bright white life, showing the empty glades reaching away between groves of purple alien trees. He noticed, absently, that the trees seemed to have changed a little in color since his arrival.

The village was hidden from view by the outer trees but there should have been some activity in the broad area visible to him. There was none, not even along the distant segment of what should have been a busy road. The natives were up to something and he knew, from hard experience on other alien worlds, that it would be nothing good. It would be another misunderstanding of some kind and he didn't know enough of their incomprehensible language to ask them what it was—

Suddenly, as it always came, he felt someone or something standing close behind him and peering over his shoulder. He dropped his hand to the blaster he had taken to wearing at all times and whirled.

Nothing was behind him. There never was. The control room was empty, with no hiding place for anything, and the door was closed, locked by the remote-control button beside him. There was nothing.

The sensation of being watched faded, as though the watcher had withdrawn to a greater distance. It was perhaps the hundredth time within six days that he had felt the sensation. And when he slept at night something came to nuzzle at his mind; faceless, formless, utterly alien. For the past three nights he had not let the blaster get beyond quick reach of his hand, even when in bed.

But whatever it was, it could not be on the ship. He had searched the ship twice, a methodical compartment-by-compartment search that had found nothing. It had to be the work of the natives from outside the ship. Except . . .

Why, if the natives were telepathic, did the one called Throon go through the weary pretense of trying to learn a mutually understandable form of communication?

There was one other explanation, which he could not accept: that he was following in the footsteps of Will Garret of Ship Nine who had deliberately gone into a white sun two months

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after the death of his twin brother.

He looked at the chair beside his own, Johnny's chair, which would forever be empty, and his thoughts went back down the old, bitter paths. The Exploration Board had been wrong when they thought the close bond between identical twins would make them the ideal two-man crews for the lonely, lifetime journeys of the Exploration Ships. Identical twins were too close; when one of them died, the other died in part with him.

They had crossed a thousand light-years of space together, he and Johnny, when they came to the bleak planet that he would name Johnny's World. He should never have let Johnny go alone up the slope of the honey-combed mountain—but Johnny had wanted to take the routine record photographs of the black, tiger-like beasts which they had called cave cats and the things had seemed harmless and shy, despite their ferocious appearance.

"I'm taking them a sack of food that I think they might like," Johnny had said. "I want to try to get some good close-up shots of them."

Ten minutes later he heard the distant snarl of Johnny's blaster. He ran up the mountainside, knowing already that he was too late. He found two of the cave cats lying where Johnny had killed them. Then he found Johnny, at the foot of a high cliff. He was dead, his neck broken by the fall. Scattered all around him from the torn sack was the food he had wanted to give to the cats.

He buried Johnny the next day, while a cold wind moaned under a lead-gray sky. He built a monument for him; a little mound of frosty stones that only the wild animals would ever see—

A chime rang, high and clear, and the memories were shattered. The orange light above the hyperspace communicator was flashing; the signal that meant the Exploration Board was calling him from Earth.

He flipped the switch and said, "Paul Jameson, Exploration Ship One."

The familiar voice of Brender spoke:

"It's been some time since your preliminary report. Is everything all right?"

"In a way," he answered. "I was going to give you the detailed report tomorrow."

"Give me a brief sketch of it now."

"Except for their short brown fur, the natives are humanoid in appearance. But there are basic differences. Their body temperature is cool, like their climate. Their vision range is from just within the visible red on into the infrared. They'll shade their eyes from the light of anything as hot as boiling water but they'll look square into the ship's floodlights and never see them."

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"And their knowledge of science?" Brender asked.

"They have a good understanding of it, but along lines entirely different from what our own were at their stage of development. For example: they power their machines with chemicals but there is no steam, heat, or exhaust."

"That's what we want to find—worlds where branches of research unknown to our science are being explored. How about their language?"

"No progress with it yet." He told Brender of the silence in the village and added, "Even if Throon should show up I could not ask him what was wrong. I've learned a few words but they have so many different definitions that I can't use them."

"I know," Brender said. "Variable and unrelated definitions, undetectable shades of inflection—and sometimes a language that has no discernibly separate words. The Singer brothers of Ship Eight ran into the latter. We've given them up as lost."

"The Singers—dead?" he exclaimed. "Good God—it's been only a month since the Ramon brothers were killed."

"The circumstances were similar," Brender said. "They always are. There is no way the Exploration men can tell the natives that they mean them no harm and the suspicion of the natives grows into dangerous hostility. The Singers reported the natives on that world to be both suspicious and possessing powerful weapons. The Singers were proceeding warily, their own weapons always at hand. But, somehow, the natives caught them off-guard—their last report was four months ago."

There was a silence, then Brender added, "Their ship was the ninth—and we had only fifteen."

He did not reply to the implications of Brender's statement. It was obvious to them all what the end of the Plan would be. What it had to be.

It had been only three years since the fifteen heavily armed Exploration ships set out to lead the way for Terran expansion across the galaxy; to answer a cry from far planets, and to find all the worlds that held intelligent life. That was the ultimate goal of the Plan: to accumulate and correlate all the diverse knowledge of all the intelligent life-forms in the galaxy. Among the achievements resulting from that tremendous mass of data would be a ship's drive faster even than hyperspace; the Third Level Drive which would bring all the galaxies of the universe within reach.

And now nine ships were gone out of fifteen and nineteen men out of thirty . . .

"The communication barrier," Brender said. "The damned communication barrier has been the cause behind the loss of

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every ship. And there is nothing we can do about it. We're stymied by it . . ."

The conversation was terminated shortly afterward and he moved about the room restlessly, wishing it was time to lift ship again. With Johnny not there the dark world was like a smothering tomb. He would like to leave it behind and drive again into the star clouds of the galaxy; drive on and on into them—

A ghostly echo touched his mind; restless, poignantly yearning. He swung to face the locked door, knowing there could be nothing behind it. The first real fear came to him as he did so. The thing was lonely—the thing that watched him was as lonely as he was . . .

What else could any of it be but the product of a mind in the first stage of insanity?

The natives came ten minutes later.

The viewscreen showed their chemically - powered vehicle emerge from the trees and roll swiftly across the glade. Four natives were in it while a fifth one lay on the floor, apparently badly injured.

The vehicle stopped a short distance in front of the airlock and he recognized the native on the floor. It was Throon, the one with whom he had been exchanging language lessons.

They were waiting for him when he emerged from the ship, pistol-like weapons in their belts and grim accusation in their manner.

Throon was muttering unintelligibly, unconscious. His skin, where not covered by the brown fur, was abnormal in appearance. He was dying.

The leader of the four indicated Throon and said in a quick, brittle voice: *"Ko reegar feen no-dran!"*

Only one word was familiar: *Ko*, which meant "you" and "yesterday" and a great many other things. The question was utterly meaningless to him.

He dropped his hand a little nearer his blaster as the leader spoke again; a quick succession of unknown words that ended with a harshly demanding *"kreson!"*

Kreson meant "now," or "very quickly." All the other words were unfamiliar to him. They waited, the grim menace about them increasing when he did not answer. He tried in vain to find some way of explaining to them he was not responsible for Throon's sickness and could not cure it.

Then he saw the spray of leaves that had caught on the corner of the vehicle when it came through the farther trees.

They were of a deep purple color. All the trees around the ship were almost gray by contrast.

Which meant that he *was* responsible for Throon's condition.

The cold white light of the ship's floodlights, under which

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he and Throon had sat for day after day, contained radiations that went through the violet and far into the ultraviolet. To the animal and vegetable life of the dark world such radiations were invisibly short and deadly.

Throon was dying of hard-radiation sickness.

It was something he should have foreseen and avoided—and that would not have happened had he accepted old Throon's pantomimed invitation, in the beginning, to go with him into the village to work at the language study. There he would have used a harmless battery lamp for illumination . . . but there was no certainty that the natives were not planning to lay a trap for him in the village and he had refused to go.

It did not matter—there was a complex radiation-neutralizer and cell-reconstructor in the ship which would return Throon to full, normal health a few hours after he was placed in its chamber.

He turned to the leader of the four natives and motioned from Throon to the airlock. "Go—there," he said in the native language.

"Bron!" the leader answered. The word meant "No" and there was a determination in the way he said it that showed he would not move from it.

At the end of five minutes his attempts to persuade them to take Throon into the ship had increased their suspicion of his motives to the point of critical danger. If only he could tell them *why* he wanted Throon taken into the ship . . . But he could not and would have to take Throon by first disposing of the four without injuring them. This he could do by procuring one of the paralyzing needle-guns from the ship.

He took a step toward the ship and spoke the words that to the best of his knowledge meant: "I come back."

"Feswin ilt k'la."

Their reply was to snatch at their weapons in desperate haste, even as the leader uttered a hoarse word of command. He brought up the blaster with the quick motion that long training had perfected and their weapons were only half drawn when his warning came:

"Bron!"

They froze, but did not release their weapons. He walked backward to the airlock, his blaster covering them, the tensely waiting manner in which they watched his progress telling him that the slightest relaxation of his vigilance would mean his death. He did not let the muzzle of the blaster waver until he was inside the airlock and the outer door had slid shut.

He was sure that the natives would be gone when he returned. And he was sure of another thing: That whatever he had said to them, it was not what he had thought he was saying.

He saw that the glade was empty when he opened the air-

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lock again. At the same time a bomb-like missile struck the ship just above the airlock and exploded with a savage crash. He jabbed the *Close* button and the door clicked shut barely in advance of three more missiles which hammered at its impervious armor.

So that, he thought wearily, is that.

He laid the useless needle-gun aside. The stage was past when he could hope to use it. He could save Throon only by killing some of the others—or he could lift ship and leave Throon to die. Either action would make the natives hate and fear Terrans; a hatred and fear that would be there to greet all future Terran ships.

That was not the way a race gave birth to peaceful galactic empire, was not the purpose behind the Plan. But always, wherever the Exploration men went, they encountered the deadly barrier; the intangible, unassailable communication barrier. With the weapons an Exploration man carried in his ship he had the power to destroy a world—but not the power to ask the simple questions that would prevent fatal misunderstandings.

And before another three years had passed the last Exploration man would die, the last Exploration ship would be lost.

He felt the full force of hopelessness for the first time. When Johnny had been alive it had been different; Johnny, who had laughed whenever the outlook was the darkest and said, *"We'll find a way, Paul—"*

The thought broke as suddenly, unexpectedly, he felt that Johnny was very near. With the feeling came the soft enclosure of a dream-like peace in which Johnny's death was vague and faraway; only something that had happened in another dream. He knew, without wondering why, that Johnny was in the control room.

A part of his mind tried to reject the thought as an illusion. He did not listen—he did not want to listen. He ran to the ship's elevator, stumbling like one not fully awake. Johnny was waiting for him in the control room—alive—alive—

He spoke as he stepped into the control room:

"Johnny—"

Something moved at the control board, black and alien, standing tall as a man on short hind legs. Yellow eyes blazed in a feline face.

It was a cave cat, like the ones that had killed Johnny.

Realization was a wrenching shock and a terrible disillusionment. Johnny was not waiting for him—not alive—

He brought up the blaster, the dream-like state gone. The paw of the cave cat flashed out and struck the ship's master light switch with a movement faster than his own. The room was instantly, totally, dark.

He fired and pale blue fire

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lanced across the room, to reveal that the cave cat was gone. He fired again, quickly and immediately in front of him. The pale beam revealed only the ripped metal floor.

"I am not where you think."

The words spoke clearly in his mind but there was no directional source. He held his breath, listening for the whisper of padded feet as the cave cat flashed in for the kill, and made a swift analysis of the situation.

The cave cat was telepathic and highly intelligent and had been on the ship all the time. It and the others had wanted the ship and had killed Johnny to reduce opposition to the minimum. He, himself, had been permitted to live until the cave cat learned from his mind how to operate the almost-automatic controls. Now, he had served his purpose—

"You are wrong."

Again there was no way he could determine the direction from which the thought came. He listened again, and wondered why it had not waylaid him at the door.

Its thought came:

"I had to let you see me or you would not have believed I existed. It was only here that I could extinguish all lights and have time to speak before you killed me. I let you think your brother was here . . ." There was a little pause. *"I am sorry. I am sorry. I should have used some other method of luring you here."*

He swung the blaster toward what seemed to be a faint sound near the astrogator unit across the room.

"We did not intend to kill your brother."

He did not believe it and did not reply.

"When we made first telepathic contact with him, he jerked up his blaster and fired. In his mind was the conviction that we had pretended to be harmless animals so that we could catch him off-guard and kill him. One of us leaped at him as he fired the second time, to knock the blaster from his hand. We needed only a few minutes in which to explain—but he would not trust us that long. There was a misjudgment of distance and he was knocked off the cliff."

Again he did not reply.

"We did not intend to kill your brother," the thought came, *"but you do not believe me."*

He spoke for the first time. "No, I don't believe you. You are physically like cats and cats don't misjudge distances. Now, you want something from me before you try to kill me, too. What is it?"

"I will have to tell you of my race for you to understand. We call ourselves the Varn, in so far as it can be translated into a spoken word, and we are a very old race. In the beginning we did not live in caves but there came a long period of time, for thousands of years, when the climate

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on our world was so violent that we were forced to live in the caves. It was completely dark there but our sense of smell became very acute, together with sufficient sensitivity to temperature changes that we could detect objects in our immediate vicinity. There were subterranean plants in the caves and food was no problem.

"We had always been slightly telepathic and it was during our long stay in the caves that our intelligence and telepathic powers became fully developed. We had only our minds—physical science is not created in dark caves with clumsy paws.

"The time finally came when we could leave the caves but it was of little help to us. There were no resources on our world but earth and stone and the thin grass of the plains. We wondered about the universe and we knew the stars were distant suns because one of our own suns became a star each winter. We studied as best we could but we could see the stars only as the little wild animals saw them. There was so much we wanted to learn and by then we were past our zenith and already dying out. But our environment was a prison from which we could never escape.

"When your ship arrived we thought we might soon be free. We wanted to ask you to take some of us with you and arrange for others of your race to stop by on our world. But you dismissed us as animals, useful only for making warm fur coats, because we lived in caves and had no science, no artifacts —nothing. You had the power to destroy us and we did not know what your reaction would be when you learned we were intelligent and telepathic. A telepathic race must have a high code of ethics and never intrude unwanted—but would you have believed that?"

He did not answer.

"The death of your brother changed everything. You were going to leave so soon that there would be no time to learn more about you. I hid on the ship so I could study you and wait until I could prove to you that you needed me. Now, I can—Throon is dying and I can give you the proper words of explanation that will cause the others to bring him into the ship."

"Your real purpose—what is it?" he asked.

"To show you that men need the Varn. You want to explore the galaxy, and learn. So do the Varn. You have the ships and we have the telepathic ability that will end the communication problem. Your race and mine can succeed only if we go together."

He searched for the true, and hidden, purpose behind the Varn proposal and saw what it would have to be.

"The long-range goal—you failed to mention that . . . your ultimate aim."

"I know what you are think-

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ing. How can I prove you wrong —now?"

There was no way for the Varn to prove him wrong, nor for him to prove the treachery behind the Varn proposal. The proof would come only with time, when the Terran-Varn cooperation had transformed Terrans into a slave race.

The Varn spoke again. *"You refuse to believe I am sincere?"*

"I would be a naive fool to believe you."

"It will be too late to save Throon unless we act very quickly. I have told you why I am here. There is nothing more I can do to convince you but be the first to show trust. When I switch on the lights it will be within your power to kill me."

The Varn was gambling its life in a game in which he would be gambling the Plan and his race. It was a game he would end at the first sound of movement from the astrogator unit across the room . . .

"I have been here beside you all the time."

A furry paw brushed his face, claws flicked gently but grimly reminding along his throat.

He whirled and fired. He was too late—the Varn had already leaped silently away and the beam found only the bare floor. Then the lights came on, glaringly bright after the darkness, and he saw the Varn.

It was standing by the control board, its huge yellow eyes watching him. He brought the blaster into line with it, his finger on the firing stud. It waited, not moving or shrinking from what was coming. The translucent golden eyes looked at him and beyond him, as though they saw something not in the room. He wondered if it was in contact with its own kind on Johnny's World and was telling them it had made the gamble for high stakes, and had lost.

It was not afraid—not asking for mercy . . .

The killing of it was suddenly an act without savor. It was something he would do in the immediate future but first he would let it live long enough to save Throon.

He motioned with the blaster and said, "Lead the way to the airlock."

"And afterward—you will kill me?"

"Lead the way," he repeated harshly.

It said no more but went obediently past him and trotted down the corridor like a great, black dog.

He stood in the open airlock, the Varn against the farther wall where he had ordered it to stand. Throon was in the radiation chamber and he had held his first intelligible conversation with the natives that day.

The Varn was facing into the red-black gloom outside the lighted airlock, where the departing natives could be heard crossing the glade. *"Their thoughts no longer hold fear*

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and suspicion," it said. *"The misunderstanding is ended."*

He raised the muzzle of the blaster in his hand. The black head lifted and the golden eyes looked up at him.

"I made you no promise," he said.

"I could demand none."

"I can't stop to take you back to your own world and I can't leave you alive on this one—with what you've learned from my mind you would have the natives build the Varn a disintegrator-equipped space fleet equal to our own ships."

"We want only to go with you."

He told it what he wanted it to know before he killed it, wondering why he should care:

"I would like to believe you are sincere—and you know why I don't dare to. Trusting a telepathic race would be too dangerous. The Varn would know everything we knew and only the Varn would be able to communicate with each new alien race. We would have to believe what the Varn told us—we would have to trust the Varn to see for us and speak for us and not deceive us as we went across the galaxy. And then, in the end, Terrans would no longer be needed except as a subject race. They would be enslaved.

"We would have laid the groundwork for an empire—the Varn Empire."

There was a silence, in which his words hung like something cold and invisible between them. Then the Varn asked, very quietly:

"Why is the Plan failing?"

"You already know," he said. "Because of the barrier—the communication barrier that causes aliens to misunderstand the intentions of Exploration men and fear them."

"There is no communication barrier between you and I—yet you fear me and are going to kill me."

"I have to kill you. You represent a danger to my race."

"Isn't that the same reason why alien kill Exploration men?"

He did not answer and its thought came, quickly, *"How does an Exploration man appear to the natives of alien worlds?"*

How did he appear? . . . He landed on their world in a ship that could smash it into oblivion; he stepped out of his ship carrying weapons that could level a city; he represented irresistible power for destruction and he trusted no one and nothing.

And in return he hoped to find welcome and friendship and cooperation . . .

"There," the Varn said, *"is your true barrier—your own distrust and suspicion. You, yourselves, create it on each new world. Now you are going to erect it between my race and yours by killing me and advising the Exploration Board to quarantine my world and never let another ship land there."*

Again there was a silence as

(Continued on page 130

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THE CREATORS

By O. H. LESLIE

ILLUSTRATOR MARTINEZ

This is a "what if—" story. We know the speed of light is 186,000 miles per second. This is—at least theoretically—the top-velocity of all movement. So, what if a space ship achieved this speed? What would happen? With time and space so delicately balanced in the cosmic scheme, the results could be startling.

DAMON didn't want to leave, not just yet. On the day the starship was scheduled to leave the planet Vexa, he roamed the spongy umber foothills in the eerie perpetual twilight, looking for new botanical specimens among the ragged, tangled growths. But the other members of the expedition, watching from the ship, knew that it was something else about the planet which made Damon want to delay their departure. It was a mystery they had all experienced from the moment of landfall, an elusive magic in the atmosphere of the strange, moody world, billions of miles from Earth. A strange and compelling attraction.

"Captain Damon, sir," Ivers, the young navigation officer, spoke respectfully into the communicator. "The men were wondering, sir—"

The distant figure straightened up guiltily. "All right, Rick. Start the controls check. I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

The three crewmen in the ship looked at each other without comment, and set about the task of checking the complex controls of the *Genesee*, in preparation for the months-long journey back.

They had left Earth almost six months ago, as one of a thousand routine investigatory flights to the Andromeda system, to provide Earth's Central Interstellar Bureau with all the basic statistics concerning the planet Vexa. They had done their job well, and now they could return.

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There would be no fanfare or parades to welcome them; such flights had become too commonplace. But in each of the four hearts within the skin-tight space rigs beat a special hope—a hope that their discovery of an unknown mineral would bring them extraordinary rewards.

It was Ivers who had made the discovery. When he located the odd, rust-colored ore that was plentiful on the planet, his examination produced surprise on his young, almost beardless face.

"Maybe I'm seeing things, Captain. But there's an element here I never heard of before."

Damon had personally double-checked the findings, and the excitement spread over his normally wooden face.

By God, it's true. It's that X mineral they're always talking about, that alien element that wouldn't have any counterpart on Earth—"

London, the ship's math expert, snickered. He was a squat, burly man, who hid his Oxford education under a gruff New York accent. "That is a fairy tale, Captain," he said. "That's an old space myth. There just ain't no new minerals in the universe. Just good old iron, nickel, copper, zinc—"

"Then we're crazy, or the instruments are out of whack. But this stuff has a density that exceeds anything I've ever heard of. It's got an atomic weight more than double that of uranium. Just *hold* the damn stuff—"

London had blinked, and taken a small handful of the ore. He exclaimed in surprise when the small nugget dropped his hand to the knee.

"Heavy, ain't it? You'd never think—"

"I tell you it's *new!*" Ivers said enthusiastically. "The most fissionable mineral ever! You realize how *valuable* this stuff could be?"

"Don't get big ideas." Farrell, the lanky engineer, chuckled. "We're not allowed to stake any claims, Rick. All we can do is report the find to the CIB."

"There'll be *something* in it for us, Captain Damon—" He whirled towards the chief officer, his eyes shining. "Could I have permission to set up a refining rig? If I could bring back the pure stuff—"

Damon shook his head. "Can't spare you, Rick. We've got a lot else to do."

"Please, Captain! If we have to take the crude ore, with our weight limitations, I could only take a few pounds."

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They had argued, and the captain finally agreed. Within three weeks, almost six thousand pounds of the new material had been brought to a pure state—but the six thousand pounds were contained in a rusty block of metal less than one foot square.

Now they were ready for the return flight, and yet not ready at all. As the long twilighted days passed, the planet's mystic mood had fallen upon them all. They didn't know what accounted for their dreamy state, but still they found it difficult to start the power in the rocket engines that would carry them away.

"Captain Damon," Rick said again into the communicator. "All controls check okay. We're ready any time you say."

They heard his answering sigh. "All right, Rick. I'll be aboard in five minutes."

They saw the spacesuited figure straighten, look around at the gray-blue sky overhead, and walk towards the ship. Damon climbed the narrow ladder, and as the shiny crown of his helmet showed above the entrance, he said:

"Prepare for takeoff."

They stood about the viewport when the ship was in the electronic hands of the automatic controls, and watched the hazy ball diminish in sight.

Space seemed empty and uninspiring.

"Well, that's that," Damon said. "Now comes the hard part."

They knew what he meant. The return journey would take more than three months. There would be little for them to do except amuse themselves. It would be hard, but they would manage.

"What the hell," London said sharply, looking at Rick Ivers' face. "Are you *crying*, for pete's sake?"

"I can't help it." Ivers jabbed away the tears ferociously. "I don't know what's got into me. But I feel so damn *sad*. Like somebody died—"

Farrell touched his shoulder. "It's okay, kid," he drawled. "I feel pretty rotten, too. Must be something to do with the change of pressure, or something."

"No," Captain Damon said. "It's something else. I've got the feeling something's happened, or going to happen. I can't explain it, either. But it's there."

They looked at each other wonderingly, searching for the answer in their faces. Then London forced himself

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to laugh, and said: "I got a great idea. Let's run off an old Chaplin. That'll pull us outa the dumps."

Damon grinned. "Okay. How about *City Lights?*"

They set up the movie equipment, and London flipped on the image. Nobody laughed during the show.

They detected the trouble a day later. It might have occurred sooner, but nobody had thought of checking the controls. Farrell made the report casually.

"Our speed is what?" Damon said.

"Increasing," Farrell answered. "According to the original control settings, we have been picking up velocity."

"The instruments must be off," the captain frowned.

He checked them himself. The difference in the reading was fractional, but it was there. It was disturbing; the ship's servo-mechanism should have kept the reading pinpointed to the original velocity set at takeoff.

"Okay, men," Damon said. "We won't be so bored for the next few days. We're going to check every control and mechanism on the *Genesee.*"

London groaned. "But that's *work*, Captain."

"Do us good."

But the investigation produced no evidence of mechanical failure, and Damon had to reach another conclusion.

"Lieutenant Ivers, your log reports a setting of 144700. The dials are reading 144703. We can't find the fault in the ship, so the error must be yours."

London said: "Just a minute, Captain. Might as well get the record straight. The reading is now 144708."

Damon stared at him. "That's crazy—"

"But it's true. Must be some kind of special phenomenon."

"What kind of phenomenon?" Farrell said. "Never heard of anything like this. And I've been spaceborne since I was a kid."

"I don't know," the captain said. "But it's nothing to get excited about. Not yet."

Two days later, the reading was 144800.

"Let's not worry," Damon said again, loud and forcefully, as if the statement was made to allay his own fears. "The difference is only fractional. We'll just get back sooner, that's all."

London, sitting at the ship's analog computor, rubbed his scalp and scowled. "Maybe too soon," he said. "If my calcula-

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tions are right, we're increasing speed by something like .000009 every hour. If you figure the ratio—"

"I said cut it out. There's nothing we can do about it—so let's wait and see."

They waited.

And sixty hours later, the velocity of the starship *Genesee* had increased by one-third.

They stood about the dials, and Damon said:

"All right, we're in a jam. Let's keep our heads and figure a way out."

"It's Vexa," London said bitterly. "It's that nutty planet's fault. It's got us all bewitched."

"The new mineral," Ivers said, licking his lips. "Maybe it's having an effect on our instruments. How do we know what a highly-fissionable metal could do?"

"You know better," Damon said. "The instruments are inertial; no magnetism could affect the readings. But you may have a thought. Maybe the metal is affecting the ship's engines themselves—"

Farrell made a noise. "Never heard of such a thing."

"Maybe so. But we never heard of such a mineral, either. So let's find out."

Ivers took charge of the study, feeling a personal responsibility for the Vexa metal. His report came three days later, when the ship's velocity had increased one-half.

"Something's happening, all right. But it's got me baffled, Captain. The stuff's increased in radioactivity and density. I can't even tell how much; our instruments aren't that sensitive."

"I say dump the stuff," London growled.

"No!" Ivers almost shouted. "We can't do that. It's the only worthwhile thing we brought back—"

"Let's not get excited," Damon said placatingly. "We will wait a while, and see what happens. If the mineral still gets more active, we'll probably have our villain. Then we won't have any choice *but* to dump it—not if we don't want to plow into the Earth at a million miles per. Then we'll have to get rid of it."

"It can't be the mineral," Ivers said. "It just can't be—"

"You don't want it to be," London sneered. "You think we're gonna be heroes on account of that stuff."

They glared at each other, and the captain said:

"Keep the peace, gentlemen.

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We don't know anything for sure."

The next day, they knew for sure.

"Speed's still increasing," Farrell reported. "And at a higher ratio than ever."

"What about the mineral?"

"Getting hotter," Ivers said unhappily. "I guess we don't have any choice."

"Get ready to dump it," Damon said.

The four of them went to the cargo hold, where the foot square block of rusty metal lay in its lead housing. They swung the electromagnetic hoist into position, and guided the contact block over the mineral.

"Look out!" Ivers shouted.

The hoist began to slip, and the chains slid until they blurred before their eyes. The contact block smashed atop the Vexa metal with a clang.

"Did you see that?" Ivers said, staring. "The stuff's got more magnetic power than the hoist. We can't budge it!"

"This baby has built-in gravity," London said. "If you ask me, it's being attracted by something outside this ship. Maybe that's why our speed's increasing. Maybe something is *pulling* this damn hunk of metal towards it!"

"But what?" Farrell said. "We're eighty million miles from any solid body."

Damon looked thoughtful. "Earth," he said. "Maybe it's the Earth."

They looked at him bewildered.

"It sounds crazy. But I keep having the feeling that this thing is being drawn to the Earth—as if it wants to get there so bad that it's increasing the velocity of the ship."

"We can check that out," Farrell said easily. "Let's just change course for a while. We won't have to worry about making up the time; we're weeks early as it is."

"All right," Damon said. "We'll try it. Let's divert the ship by six vectors. Just as an experiment."

They followed him to the manual control section of the ship. They watched the captain switch off the robot pilot and grasp the levers that would activate the secondary rockets.

They saw his face go white.

"What's happening?" Ivers said.

"Nothing. That's the trouble. Rockets aren't firing. There's no response at all."

"That can't be—"

"It can. The controls are dead. We're not steering this ship any more. Something else is."

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London swore. "No hellish metal's going to tell *me* where to go—"

"If we can't change course," Farrell said, "and the velocity keeps going up—"

"We'll crash!" Ivers shouted suddenly, voicing all their fears. "We'll never be able to brake the ship. We won't be able to slow down—"

"It'll be a record," Farrell chuckled. "We might even reach the speed of light. That'll give us the recognition you're so hot for, Rick."

"We've got to dump that mineral," Damon said tensely. "It's our only hope."

"But how? We can't budge it! We can't make it do anything it doesn't want to do—"

"We'll have to try. That's all I can think of. Try."

They tried, and they failed, and the velocity of the *Genesee* doubled and redoubled again.

Finally, they came to a conclusion.

"The Vexa metal's hotter than ever," Ivers said. "Radioactivity's increased thousands of times. So's the density. It must weigh millions of pounds by now. It's unbelievable—"

"It's more than that," London said angrily. "It's dangerous. This thing has an explosive potential that makes a thousand cobalt bombs look like a firecracker. If anything ever triggered that stuff—"

"We'd have the biggest damn blowup in history," Farrell said. "We'll be our own super-nova . . ."

Captain Damon walked to the viewport, and stared at the still, unblinking stars that gave no evidence of their incredibly rapid motion.

"It *will* be triggered," he said hollowly. "There's no question about it. If our speed keeps doubling and tripling this way, we'll hit Earth with all the force of an atomic bombardment. The metal will blow—and that'll be the end."

He turned to them.

"Not just the end of us," he finished quietly. "The end of everything. The whole planet. Earth."

They were stunned into silence.

"And there's nothing we can do?" London said, his angry face suddenly reposed, resignation in his voice.

"Only one thing I can think of. Wait until we get into radio range of Earth. Tell them what's happening. Get them to send an intercepting ship."

Ivers put a hand to his trembling lips. He was young, recently married, newly commissioned. He was just begin-

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ning to learn how sweet life could be.

"And do what?" he said.

"Fire on the *Genesee*. Destroy the ship, before we wipe out the Earth."

They remained wordless for some minutes. Then Farrell said:

"We should have known it, the minute we left that crazy planet. We had a special kind of destiny . . ."

"I don't want that kind of destiny," Damon said fiercely. "I don't want to be part of it. I'd rather die in space . . ."

"They say the world will end in fire," London said dreamily. "And we're the fire . . ."

"Not if we can help it! Not if they can stop us. Ivers. Ivers!"

"Yes, sir?"

"Do some figuring, you and London. Find out when we can expect to be within radio range."

"I can tell you that," the math expert said. "At the speed we're at now, eight or nine days. But if the ratio doubles again, half that time."

"Linda," Ivers said.

"What?"

"Linda." His eyes were round. "Linda's expecting me, Captain. We hardly had a honeymoon. Linda didn't like that much, Captain. Only a couple of days, and then I had to leave . . ."

Damon examined his face sharply.

"Snap out of it, Rick."

"Hell of a thing," Ivers said, starting a giggle in his throat. "We went to a hotel on Park Avenue, very fancy, and the air-conditioning was on the fritz. Hell of a way to start a honeymoon . . ."

"Take it easy, Rick." London touched him gently.

"Be damned nice, seeing Linda. How about you, London? Why didn't you ever get hitched? Afraid of the responsibility?" The giggle began to emerge from his parted lips.

"He's flipping," Farrell drawled. "Maybe I better give him a shot—"

"Shoot!" Rick Ivers shouted suddenly, leaping to his feet. "Why don't they shoot!"

"Watch out—", London grabbed for his arm, but the younger man batted his hand away savagely.

"Can't let 'em do it! Can't let 'em do it, Captain!"

He leaped towards the bulkhead, and ripped a wrench from its magnetic grip on the metal wall. Before they even knew his purpose, he was at the radio mechanism, battering the faces of the instruments, smashing and destroy-

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ing the transistors. Farrell was on him seconds later, his big hands grappling for the destructive tool, but Ivers had found superior strength in his unthinking panic. He lashed out and Farrell was thrown back by the force of his blow. London and Captain Damon took over the attack, but it was many minutes before they could subdue the berserk navigator.

When it was over, Ivers lay sobbing on his bunk, and Farrell was looking hopelessly at the damage to the radio gear.

"It's a mess," he said, shaking his head. "A terrible mess. He didn't get at the receiving unit—but the sending equipment's shot to pieces."

Damon seemed to be fighting for self-control. Then he lost the battle, and threw himself at the young man on the bunk.

"You stinking coward!" he screamed. "You traitor—"

"Stop it, Captain!" London, his own face struggling with emotion, tore Damon away. "It wasn't his fault. He wasn't thinking straight—"

"He's made sure of it now," Damon said, panting. "He's fixed us for sure. Now we've got the destiny for sure . . ."

He staggered towards the viewport.

"God!" he said. "Don't let it happen. Don't let it be our fault. . . ." He continued to plead in wild panic.

In four days, the *Genesee* was traveling at the speed of 167,000 miles a second.

"Another day," London said quietly. "Maybe less."

"How's Rick?"

"Sleeping. I'm keeping him pretty well drugged up, Captain, if that's okay with you. It wouldn't be such a bad thing if he slept right through the—" He stopped.

"I know," the captain said. "It might be a good idea for all of us. So we won't have to think about what we're doing. About destroying a billion years of trying . . ."

"We can always get lucky. A meteor might hit us before we reach Earth—"

"Even that wouldn't help now. The mineral's got enough explosive energy stored up to destroy the solar system right now. It's inexorable, London, that's the only word for it. We're a juggernaut . . ."

"Captain." Farrell was looking in his direction. "I've been getting some response from the radio. Want to hear it?"

"No. Yes," Damon said. "Let's hear it."

There were ten minutes of squeaks and groans from the

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receiver, and then the voice of a man.

"*. . . a sacred dedication, a holy purpose, a one-mindedness, one-heartedness for all the peoples of Earth. These are the goals of the Federation, the goals we will seek and find or die . . .*"

"What the hell," London said. "That doesn't sound like CIB headquarters."

"We've picked up a public broadcast," the captain said. "Almost sounds like Culver, the Federation President . . ."

"It does at that. Funny, ain't it? Next thing you know we'll be getting singing commercials. Hell of a way to face the end of the world . . ."

"Listen," Damon said.

"*. . . Seventh Moon forces are deploying about Tycho Brahe crater in the hope of trapping the insurrectionists. Reports from the Martian headquarters say . . .*"

"Something's screwy," London said. "Sounds like an old news broadcast, during the Moon Revolt. Must be some kind of special program . . ."

There was a snatch of music, oddly distorted, but the melody caused London to start in surprise.

"Now I know I'm nuts," he said. "That song's a hundred years old if it's a day."

"What's the difference?" Damon said wearily.

"He got up and walked to the velocity gauges.

"Look," he said bitterly. "Scientific history is made, gentlemen. We've passed the speed of light."

"No kidding?" London joined him, and whistled. "You're right. 188,979 a second. Unless we figured the instrumentation wrong—"

"It's right," Damon sighed. "It was inevitable, at the ratio we're increasing. It's a great scientific achievement—but it comes at the wrong time. We can't do anything with it."

"What an opportunity. Einstein would've given his soul for this chance, eh, Captain? But I don't *feel* any different. I didn't disappear or anything. Isn't that what's supposed to happen?"

"I don't know. Nobody ever had the chance to find out. Except us—"

Farrell said: "This radio's getting curiouser and curiouser, Captain. I'd swear I'm getting broadcasts from the last century—"

Damon didn't answer, but his face reflected a thought so strange that the crewmen stopped talking and waited for his next words.

"The speed of light," he whispered.

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"What's on your mind, Captain?"

"Once they believed it was impossible to pass it. But we did. The mineral did it for us . . ."

"So what?"

"They said that nothing could surpass the speed of light without drastic results. Even the complete reversal of Time . . ."

London snorted. "Bunk. Nothing can go back in Time. That's a madman's dream."

"Nothing could travel at our speed, once. But now we've done it—and maybe something else. Maybe we're going backwards in Time—maybe that's what accounts for the strange broadcasts we're getting—"

"They've stopped," Farrell told him. "Reception's ended."

"Receiver okay?"

"Looks perfect to me. Just no more signals, that's all."

"Because there weren't any. Not at our moment in history. . . ."

"You ain't serious?" London said. "You really think we're Time-traveling now?"

"I do." Damon went to the viewport. "We're looking at a younger universe now. We're going back, every second."

"And what happens when we reach Earth?"

"The same thing that would have happened before . . . We'll destroy it, utterly. Maybe the entire solar system . . ."

"But that's what's so impossible!" London snorted in disbelief. "If we destroy a younger Earth, then we'll have destroyed the future. That means there wouldn't have been any *Genesee*, or any planet Vexa, or you or me or Farrell, or Ivers, or any crazy metal—"

"He's right there, Captain," Farrell drawled softly. "It's a paradox, that just can't happen. We can't destroy our own being before it existed."

"I can't explain. I just know it's the truth. It's the only answer . . ."

They stood at the viewport together, while Rick Ivers slept his drugged sleep, his face peaceful in dreams.

"Another hour maybe," London said.

"Even less," Farrell answered.

"The destiny," Captain Damon said. "But what is it?"

"I can't take this," London tore his gaze from the viewport and went to the analog computer. "I've got to keep busy. "I'll track us, and see where we are."

"Good idea," Damon said.

Twenty minutes later, the mathematician looked up.

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"We're almost there. We're almost home."

"Ship's changing motion," Damon said. "I'm beginning to feel it. How about you?"

"You're right. We're getting ready to descend. The metal's pulling us there . . ."

In the next moment, the viewport was struck by a blaze of light so intense that the three men threw their hands protectively before their eyes.

"Good God!" Damon said. "What is it?"

"The sun—"

"No!" London shouted. "Our sun never looked like that—"

"It's crazy! It's all so very wrong—"

"This can't be our system. We've gone haywire. The damn metal's taken us into hell—"

"It's a giant star," Damon said, his voice unsteady, "It's not the sun—"

"But it has to be. There's no other answer—"

"We're heading into it! Temperature's going up—"

"God, it's hot!"

"This is wrong, all wrong! Where's the Earth? Where's the Moon? Where's the planets?"

"There's only the sun. That giant sun—"

"God, God!" Damon cried suddenly, falling to his knees before the awesome ball of fire whose dreadful light and heat was filling the interior of the ship. "God, thank you, thank you—"

"No! No!" Damon shouted, over the mounting roar of the colossal furnace that was drawing them to their death. "You don't understand! None of us understood! This is our *real* destiny. To *create* the Earth, not destroy it! To *make* the solar system, not end it! This is what it was for—this is why it happened—"

They never heard his final words. The giant sun beckoned, and the ship answered its call, speeding into the heart of great star, bringing a clash of atoms that rocked the cosmos with the might of its explosive force, sending great fiery fragments spinning into space. If God had been counting, the number would be Nine.

THE END

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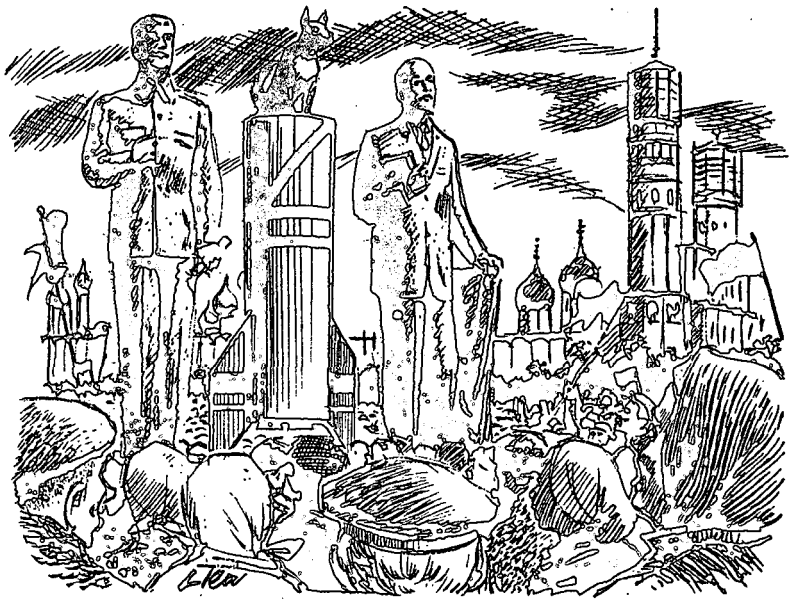

It Started With Sputnik

Perhaps the lesson to be learned from this little imaginative yarn is: "Don't send a cat to do a man's job!"

By BERTRAM A. CHANDLER

ILLUSTRATOR LLEWELLYN

THAT was the year of the satellites, of the Sputniks. That was the year of the Space Dog. That was the year it all started.

We didn't know what it was that we were starting. None of us as much as guessed—not even the theologians. To the scientists and the engineers it was

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the Dawn of the Space Age, as it was to most of the millions of newspaper readers. Oh, there were some pessimistic souls who regarded the triumphs of the rocketeers as proof that no place in the world was safe from the intercontinental ballistic missile. They were right—in a way. The launching of that first, unfortunate hound into her closed orbit round the planet did mean the doom of civilization, although in a totally unexpected manner.

Those of you who have never known what it was like before the coming of our insolent, capricious masters will find it hard to envisage things as they were. Even if we are successful in this desperate attempt to overthrow our rulers there can never be any return to the old days and the old ways. It could be that the devils we know may prove preferable to the devils we don't know—but I doubt it. The Power whose aid we hope to enlist may be aloof, and cruel at times, but she has an essential dignity sadly lacking in those other Powers that we so foolishly — albeit unwittingly — invoked. Too, *her* people have suffered as much as ours under the rule of the beasts.

It wasn't a bad world at all —by present day standards— the year that the trouble started. We grumbled, and we dreaded, at times, the future— but it wasn't a bad world. Even with the ever present threat of atomic war, it wasn't a bad world. We were ruling—or misruling—ourselves. The power was ours, *ours*, as was the choice. It was up to us to decide whether we lived in Heaven or died in Hell. There had been, during our last big war—it finished some twelve years before the launching of the Space Dog —a lot of talk about the Four Freedoms. They were what we were supposed to be fighting for. Freedom from want. Freedom from fear. Freedom of speech. Freedom of thought. Nobody mentioned the Fifth Freedom, which is the most important of all, and that's the one that we miss the most. Freedom to go to Hell our own way. We —all of us who can remember the old days—rather resent having been dragged there by outsiders.

It didn't matter what nationality we were—the world was a collection of nations then and not, as now, just two big Empires—we all had that freedom. And we were free to dream, too. We were free to dream of the Earthly paradise that would come with the wise use of automation and atomic power. We were free to dream of ships to the Moon—and how close we were to realizing that dream!— and the planets and, even, the stars. But automation is no more than a legend—all manufactured things are made, now, slowly and painfully by men, women and children. Atomic power is only an old, half-re-

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membered, half-believed story. *They* saw to it that the power stations and the research establishments were destroyed. *They* used *their* powers to make ineffective and useless the stockpiles of atomic weapons, of all weapons. Perhaps *they* saved the world—but *they* saved it for *their* people, not for us—for their purposes.

It was the Russians who launched the first animal into Space. A dog, it was. You'll know all about her. Her statue stands in every village, every town. It stands by the dozen in every city. She died, eventually, out there in the cold and the darkness, in what we thought of, then, as the loneliness. Before she died she must have called—and her call was answered. It wasn't answered at once. After all—a Being to whom Eternity is no more than a normal life span is slow to awaken, is slow, even when awakened, to take action.

After that first dog there were other animals. There were rats. (We were lucky there, very lucky. Somehow Man, who has always had an odd taste in deities, never got around to worshipping those repellent creatures.) There were guinea pigs. There were mice. There were monkeys. To an unbiased observer—if such a one existed—it must have seemed that Man was determined to fill the Space around his planet with a sample of every known life form.

There were, as I have said, monkeys.

This went on for a few years, with all concerned feverishly accumulating data that would be of value when the first human beings ventured into Space. Detailed plans were in existence for the establishment of the Lunar Colony, for the management of the Mars Expedition. The first man-carrying rockets were already being constructed, and the first Space Station was only a matter of a few weeks in the future when the realization came that all was not well.

It was in Russia that the trouble started. The Russians were always a secretive people, and at first the lack of news of events within the borders of that country were taken to be indicative of some struggle for leadership. It had happened before and was, we all thought, happening again. Then fantastic, incredible reports began to filter through. There was, it seemed, another Russian Revolution. The dogs had risen against their erstwhile masters. Packs of savage hounds roamed the streets of Moscow and Leningrad, ripping to bloody shreds any man, woman or child unlucky enough to cross their path. The Red Air Force was grounded, and the Army was trying to fight the enemy with swords and bayonets, firearms being useless. Some of the Russian leaders escaped and made their way to London and Washington. They appealed to the Western

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leaders for aid. They begged that fleets of aircraft be sent to bomb their cities. They told of the great, shadowy figure, like that of a man with a dog's head, who strode always before the brute armies, whose appearance struck men with a paralyzing terror.

They were mad, we all said. They had been deposed by a people who had had enough of tyranny—we didn't know what tyranny was, then—and wished to be revenged upon those who had been their subjects. I often wonder what would have happened if we had believed them. Would our aircraft, our atomic bombs, have been effective? Could we have stemmed the tide before it had risen too far?

We heard no more from Russia—but we heard of the wave of canine revolt that was spreading westwards from her borders, that had engulfed Poland and Finland and the Scandinavian countries, that was beginning to sweep through Germany. Throughout the remainder of the world the authorities acted at last. They knew *what* was happening, without knowing *why*. The most plausible theory was that the Russians had developed a virus that would turn the most docile household pet into a savage killer and that by some mischance the virus had got loose in their own country. In any case the disease, as it was thought to be, was spreading. Orders went out that all dogs—save for a few to be kept for laboratory use—were to be killed. Many were killed. Many were hidden by loving masters and mistresses—and repaid the trust by acts of treachery such as we, in these latter years, have come to associate with that once crawling, servile slave now become master.

Then, suddenly, the dogs found allies—allies with a manual dexterity the equal of Man's. In the old days monkeys were indigenous to the Tropics—to India and Africa and Central America—but there were many of them to be found in all the nations of the world. They were in zoological gardens—the places in which animals from all over the planet were displayed for the edification and education of the people. They were in laboratories. Some of them, incredible as it may seem, were used in the manufacture of remedies for various diseases to which the human race was—and still is, especially so now that no further supplies of vaccine are being manufactured—prone. Some of them were destined to be the crews of further experimental space vehicles.

The dogs and the monkeys were a strong combination. I know. I was among those taking part in the defense of Southampton, trying to hold back the brutes from the docks and the evacuation ships. I was one of a mixed party of merchant seamen and civilians manning a barri-

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cade. Rifles we had, and shotguns, and an ancient Lewis machine gun. We wondered, as we waited there, what had happened to the Army and the Air Force. We knew, within a little, what had happened to the Navy. We had heard of the simian saboteurs whose small size had enabled them to creep aboard vessels unobserved, whose nimble hands had proved capable of causing the destruction of many a ship.

It was about half an hour after sunset when the action started. We saw them coming along the road, keeping to the shadows, hugging the walls of the buildings. There were Alsatians and terriers, spaniels even. We opened fire—single, aimed shots from the rifles, a burst of tracer from the Lewis gun. We heard yelps. We saw a few dark shapes sprawling motionless; the others vanished into doorways and side streets.

We waited, and saw that they were advancing again. Again we opened fire. Had there been anybody among us with any military training it is possible that we would have watched the rooftops as well as the road. But we didn't. The first grenade that fell among us put the Lewis gun out of action and killed most of our party.

I lay where I had fallen and saw them there, silhouetted against the pale sky—a row of black, gesticulating shapes like evil pygmies. I still had hold of my rifle and I raised it, pulling the trigger. There was a faint click, nothing more. I ejected the round, tried to fire again.

Then I saw *It* looming high in the sky, behind *Its* people. All of you will have seen *It*, and you will have felt awe and terror, but what you will have felt will be a pale shadow of the feelings of anybody like myself seeing *It* for the first time. I stared at the great shape of the crowned monkey in speechless terror, at the huge, shadowy bulk of it, at the gleaming, crimson eyes.

Somebody was shaking me, pulling me to my feet. Somebody was screaming, "Run! Run!" It seemed ages before I could force my head to turn away from the frightening sight of the first god that I had ever seen. It was ages more before I could will my legs to move. And then I was running like one in a nightmare, seemingly skimming over the ground, conscious all the time that there was some unspeakable horror close behind me.

Later that night we sat, my companion and I, in a bedroom of a deserted house. We watched from the window the flames leaping higher and higher over the docks; we heard the screams. We still had our rifles with us, but doubted that they would be of any use except as clubs. We had knives that we had found in the kitchen.

It was my friend who explained it all to me. He was an aeronautical engineer by trade

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—and he had hoped, he said, to become an astronautical engineer—and had made the study of comparative religions his hobby.

"I think I've got it doped out," he said. "There *may* be a way out of the mess, too. Anyhow, I'm going to tell as many people as I can what I think has happened, starting with you. Meanwhile—keep your eyes skinned for dogs or monkeys-. . ."

"I am," I said. "And I've blocked the chimney."

"Good. Then just listen while I'm talking—and keep on watching. This, I think, was the way of it. For quite a few centuries now we've been an irreligious race. Even in the so-called backward countries people have been letting science take the place of their gods. Now—what happens to gods when they have no worshippers?"

"They . . . die, I suppose," I said.

"That's what I used to think. I don't think so any longer. They sleep—but not on this world. They sleep somewhere in Space. A thousand miles out? A million? The other side of the moon? I don't know . . .

"Anyhow, just imagine two deities slumbering peacefully out there, two deities whose animal worshipping followers have long since lost their belief, their faith. Two deities whose working life, so far as this world is concerned, is over. One of them Egyptian and the other one Indian . . .

"One of them, we will suppose, is a dog. We, fools that we are, send a dog out to perish in the cold and the dark. That dog appeals, somehow, to the essential spirit of its race, the spirit that was worshipped in ancient Egypt . . . Do you remember the dog-headed god that the Russians reported? Then we start sending out monkeys. They make their appeal to their race spirit . . ."

"Incredible!" I said.

"Isn't everything that's happened incredible?" he countered. "We've dreaded fission bombs and fusion bombs and cobalt bombs and bacteriological warfare—but none of us ever dreamed that we should see the world given over to the rule of the beasts."

"They'll be beaten," I said.

"Will they?" he asked. "Will they? It's gods that we're up against, remember—*gods*. What can you do when the fuel of a jet or rocket motor fails to burn? What can you do when a hydrogen bomb—it's been tried—just won't explode? What can you do when even rifles are useless? It's like those old wars in the Old Testament that the Children of Israel always won because the Almighty intervened on their behalf with a few miracles."

"What do you intend to do?" I asked him.

"To survive," he said. "They'll not be killing all of us—we're too useful to them. Can you imagine a monkey doing one

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hard day's work? Can you imagine a dog being willing to do without the pampering that he's become used to over the centuries?

"So, if enough of us with the know-how survive, we might, some day, be able to launch a man-carrying rocket into Space . . . We might be able to make our appeal to a higher authority . . ."

He survived.

He's one of the scientists on that island at which the ship will be calling shortly. Our lords and masters permitted us to maintain a pitiful skeleton of the great network of communications that once covered the world—even they, to a certain extent, are dependent upon long distance transport for the upkeep of their standards of life. Luckily neither dogs nor monkeys are sea-minded, and so it has been possible for personnel and supplies to be smuggled out of England and America and Russia. Luckily the gods are as stupid as their people—after all, they're only animals, even though they do possess supernatural powers.

Tomorrow we call at that unnamed island in the Pacific.

Tomorrow we see the rocket fired. It has taken all our resources and years of toil to build. It would never lift a man. We shall never be able to build a man-carrying ship—we realize that—and we are old, all of us, and soon there will be nobody who remembers the glories of our race before it was given over to the bestial empery of the dog and the monkey and reduced to their servitude.

The rocket will work. It has to work. It will carry into Space something living, something small, something weighing only a few pounds. It will carry into black emptiness—or not-emptiness—the representative of a race that has fared worse than Man, that has been harried almost out of existence by the legions of Anubis and Hanuman.

She knows, I think, what her destiny will be. She is sitting on my lap as I write, and she is purring, and her sharp little claws are pricking the skin of my thigh. She looks up at me and there is, I swear, a real intelligence in those green eyes.

I shall be sorry to lose her.

I hope that the wrath of Pusht, the Cat Goddess, will be recompense for my loss.

THE END

(Continued from page 51

But the slow, stupid answer was: . . . *no hungry, full . . . where is that sexy broad for the brood? . . . what a dish . . . exoskeleton is a highly stable, inert silicon plastic . . . indestructible . . . where is that babe? . . . have to start . . . now we have seven planets . . .*

No one on Earth noticed the brief flash of light nor the cube-like debris alone that reached the surface of the planet.

THE END

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MOON GLOW

By G. L. VANDENBURG

That first trip to the moon has been the subject of many stories. Mr. Vandenburg has come up with as novel a twist as we've ever read. And it could happen.

THE Ajax XX was the first American space craft to make a successful landing on the moon. She had orbited the Earth's natural satellite for a day and a half before making history. The reason for orbiting was important. The Russians had been boasting for a number of years that they would be first. Captain Junius Robb, U.S.A.F., had orders to investigate before and after landing.

The moon's dark side was explored, due to the unknown hazards involved, during the orbiting process. More thorough investigation was possible on the moon's familiar side. The results seemed to be incontrovertible. Captain Junius Robb and his crew of four were the first humans to tread the ashes of the long dead heavenly body. The Russians, for all their boasts, had never come near the place.

The Ajax XX stood tall and gaunt and mighty, framed against the forbidding blackness of space. Captain Robb had maneuvered her down to the middle of an immense crater, which the crew came to nickname "the coliseum without seats."

Robb had orders not to leave the ship. Consequently, the crew of four scrupulously chosen, well-integrated men split into two groups of two. For three days they labored at gathering specimens, conducting countless tests and piling up as much data as time and weight would allow. Captain Robb kept them well reminded of the weight problem attached to the return trip.

Near the end of the third day Captain Robb contacted his far flung crew members over helmet intercom. He ordered them back

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to the Ajax XX for a briefing session.

Soon the men entered the ship. They were hot, uncomfortable and exhausted. Once back on Earth they could testify that there was nothing romantic about a thirty-five-pound pressure suit.

Hamston, the rocket expert, summed it up: "With that damn bulb over his skull a man is helpless to remove a single bead of perspiration. He could easily develop into a raving maniac."

Robb held his meeting in the control room. "You have eight hours to finish your work, gentlemen. We're blasting off at 0900."

"I beg your pardon, Captain," said Kingsley, the young man in charge of radio operation, "but what about Washington? They haven't made contact yet and I thought—"

"I talked with Washington an hour ago!"

A modest cheer of approval went up from the crew members.

"Well, why didn't you say so before!" said Anderson, the first officer.

Robb explained. "It seems *their* equipment has been haywire for two days, they haven't been able to get through."

"How do you like that!" cracked Farnsworth, the astrogator. "We're two hundred and forty thousand miles off the Earth and our equipment works fine. They have all the comforts of Earth down at headquarters and they can't repair radio transmission for two days!"

The men laughed.

"Gentlemen," Robb continued, "every radio and TV network in the country was hooked up to the chief's office in Washington. I not only talked to General Lovett, I spoke to the whole damn country."

The men could not contain their excitement. The captain received a verbal pelting of stored-up questions.

"Did you get word to my family, Captain?" asked Kingsley.

"I hope you told them we're physically sound, Captain," said Farnsworth. "I have a fiancée that'll never forgive me if anything happens to me—"

"What's the reaction like around the country—"

"Have the Russians had anything to say yet—"

"Ha! I'll bet they're sore as hell—"

"Do you think the army would mind if I hand in my resignation?" Kingsley's remark brought vigorous applause from the others.

Captain Robb held up his hand for silence. "Hold on! Hold on! First of all, General Lovett has personally contacted relatives and told them we're all physically and mentally sound. Secondly, you'd better get set to receive the biggest damn welcome in history. The general says half the nation has invaded Florida for the occasion."

"Tell them we're not coming back," snapped Kingsley, "until

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the Florida Tourist Bureau gives us a cut."

"Kingsley, the President has declared a national holiday. We'll all be able to write our own ticket."

"Yes," Anderson put in, "to hell with the Florida Tourist Bureau!"

Captain Robb said, "We'll be so sick of parades we'll wish we'd stayed in this God forsaken place."

"Not me," boasted Farnsworth. "I'm ready for a parade in my honor any old time. The sooner the better."

"Oh, and about the Russians," said Captain Robb, smiling. "There's been nothing but a steady stream of 'no comment' out of the Kremlin since we landed here."

"Right now," said Hamston, "it's probably high noon for every scientist behind the iron curtain."

"I wonder how they plan to talk their way out of this one?" asked Farnsworth.

"Gentlemen, I'd like to go on talking about the welcome we're going to receive, but I think we'd better take first things first. Before there can be a welcome we have to get back. And we still have work to do before we start."

"What about souvenirs, Captain?" asked Farnsworth.

Robb pursed his lips thoughtfully, "Yes, I guess there is a matter of souvenirs, isn't there."

The others detected a note of disturbance in the way the captain spoke.

Kingsley asked, "Is anything wrong, Captain?"

Robb laughed with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm. "Nothing is wrong, Kingsley. The fact is we've taken on enough additional weight here to give us some concern on the return trip." He paused to study the faces of his men. They were disappointed. "But," he added emphatically, "I seem to remember promising something about souvenirs—and I guess a man can't travel five hundred thousand miles without something to show for it. I'll get together with Hamston and work out something. But remember that weight problem. First trouble we encounter on the return trip and a souvenir will be our number one expendable."

The crew was more than happy with Robb's compromise. Robb went into a huddle with Hamston, the rocket expert. When he emerged he informed the crew that each man would be permitted one souvenir which must not exceed two pounds. He allowed them four hours to find whatever they wanted. The men got back into their pressure suits and left the ship.

Captain Junius Robb stood outside the Ajax XX. His eyes scanned the great circular plain that stretched for fifty miles in all directions. The distant jagged rises of the crater's rim resembled the lower half of a gigantic bear trap.

The moon in all its splendor—

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wasn't there a song that went something like that?—the moon in all its splendor, or lack of it was Robb's mute opinion. The scientists, as usual, were right about the place. To all intents and purposes the moon was as dead as The Roman Empire. True they had found scattered vegetation; there were even two or three volcanoes spewing carbonic acid, but they spewed it as though it were life's last breath.

Nothing more. The fires of the moon had given way to soft lifeless ashes.

Robb was glad he had allowed the men to look for souvenirs. After all, it wasn't a hell of a lot to ask for. A man could cut press clippings and collect medals and frame citations; and probably these things would impress grandchildren someday. But it seemed that nothing would be quite as effective as for a man to be able to produce something tangible, an authentic piece of the moon itself.

Captain Robb had always tried to be a humble man. He recalled an interview held by the three wire services a week before take-off. One of the reporters had asked the obvious question, "Why do you want to go to the moon?" He could have given all of the high sounding, aesthetic reasons, but instead his answer was indirect, given with a modest smile. "To get to the other side, I guess," he had told them.

Like the chicken crossing the road, that was how simple and uncomplicated Robb's life had been. But now he stood, his feet spread apart, beside his mighty ship, a quarter of a million miles away from home. He was the first! And he could not fight back the feeling of pride and accomplishment that welled in him. The word "first" in this instance conjured up names like Balboa, Columbus, Peary, Magellan—and Junius Robb.

The crew members deserved the hero's welcome they would receive. They could have the banquets, parades and honorary degrees. But it was Junius Robb who had commanded the flight. It would be Junius Robb's name for the history books.

He wouldn't be needing any souvenirs.

Kingsley and Anderson were the first to return. They both carried small leather bags. Inside the ship they revealed the contents to Robb. He examined them carefully.

Kingsley had found an uncommonly large patch of brownish vegetation. He had torn away a sizeable chunk and placed it in the bag. "Who knows?" he shrugged. "I might be able to cultivate it."

"Or let it play the lead in a science fiction movie," snapped Anderson.

The first officer's bag contained a piece of one of the smaller craters. It had no immediately discernable value. It was Anderson's intention to polish it up

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and put some kind of a metal plaque on it.

Four more hours went by and there was no sign of Farnsworth or Hamston. Robb began to worry. He'd never forgive himself if anything happened to either of the two men. He waited another half hour, then ordered Kinsley and Anderson to put on their pressure suits and go look for the two missing crew members.

The search was avoided as Farnsworth entered the ship dragging Hamston behind him.

"What happened!" yelled Robb.

Farnsworth began the job of getting out of his pressure suit. "I don't know. Hamston's sick as a dog. I checked every inch of his suit and couldn't find anything out of order."

Robb bent over the prone rocket expert. Hamston looked up at him with half-opened eyes and an insipid grin on his face. He mumbled something about "a fine state of affairs."

They removed Hamston's suit and placed his limp frame on a bunk. Robb examined him for forty minutes.

He reached the curious conclusion that Hamston was as fit as a fiddle.

The rocket expert fell asleep. Robb and the rest of the crew prepared to blast off.

The Ajax XX thrust itself through space, halfway back to its home planet.

The excitement of her crew members grew with every passing second. In his concern over Hamston, Farnsworth had forgotten about his souvenir. He now opened his bag and displayed it before the others.

"What is it?" asked Kingsley.

"Dust!" was Farnsworth's proud reply.

"What the hell you going to do with dust?"

"Maybe you don't know it but this is going to be the most valuable dust on the face of the Earth! Do you realize what I can get for an ounce of this stuff?"

"What's anybody want to buy dust for?"

"Souvenirs, man, souvenirs!"

Farnsworth asked to see what Kingsley and Anderson had picked up. The two men obliged. For the next hour the three men and Robb discussed the mementoes and their possible uses on Earth.

Then Anderson said, "I sure wouldn't turn down about a gallon of good Kentucky whiskey right now!"

Robb laughed. "We did enough sweating on the way. You wouldn't want to sweat out the trip back on a bellyfull of booze."

"That may be a better idea than you think it is, Captain."

The four men turned to find Hamston sitting up on his bunk.

"Hamston!" Robb exclaimed, "how do you feel?"

"Terrible."

"What happened to you?" asked Kingsley.

Hamston stared at each man

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individually. He took a deep breath and his cheeks puffed up as he let it out slowly. "Well, I guess you'd better know now."

Robb frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Farnsworth and I separated after we got about four miles from the ship. I thought I saw something that looked like a cave. I figured I might find something interesting there to take back with me. So I told Farnsworth I'd keep radio contact with him and off I went."

"Did you find a cave?" Robb wanted to know.

"No, it was just a big indentation in the wall of the crater. I threw some light on it and found it to be ten or fifteen feet deep." He paused as though not sure of what to say next.

"So?"

"So that's where I found my souvenir."

"Well, let's see it!" said Anderson.

Hamston opened his leather bag. The object he removed rendered the crew weak in the knees. He said, "We can have that drink, Anderson, but I don't think we'll enjoy it."

He poured them each a shot from a half-filled bottle of Vodka.

(Continued from page 105

he thought of what the Varn had said and of what it had said earlier: *We are a very old race . . .* There was wisdom in the Varn's analysis of the cause of the Plan's failure and with the Varn to vanquish the communication stalemate, the new approach could be tried. They could go a long way together, men and Varn, a long, long way . . .

Or they could create the Varn Empire . . . and how could he know which it would be?

How could anyone know—except the telepathic Varn?

The muzzle of the blaster had dropped and he brought it back up. He forced the dangerous indecision aside, knowing he would have to kill the Varn at once or he might weaken again, and said harshly to it:

"The risk is too great. I want to believe you—but all your talk of trust and good intentions is only talk and my race would be the only one that had to trust."

He touched the firing stud as the last thought of the Varn came:

"Let me speak once more."

He waited, the firing stud cold and metallic under his finger.

"You are wrong. We have already set the example of faith in you by asking to go with you. I told you we did not intend to hurt your brother and I told you we saw the stars only as the little wild animals saw them. The years in the dark caves—you do not understand—"

The eyes of the Varn looked into his and beyond him; beautiful, expressionless, like polished gold.

"The Varn are blind."

THE END

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WORLD BEYOND PLUTO

(Continued from page 69)

will. Then he smiled, and began to laugh. Jane thought he was hysterical with pain. But he said: "We're a pair of bright ones. The scout-ship."

Inside, it was very small. They had to lie very close to each other, but they made it. They reached *Mozart's Lady.*

Mayhem didn't wait to say good-bye. With what strength remained to him, he almost flung the girl from the scout-ship. The pain in his shoulder was very bad, but that wasn't what worried him. What worried him was the roaring in his ears, the vertigo, the mental confusion as his *elan* drifted, its thirty days up, toward death.

He saw the girl enter *Mozart's Lady.* He blasted off, and when the space-bound coffin pierced Pluto's heavyside layer, he called the Hub.

The voice answered him as if it were mere miles away, and not halfway across a galaxy: "Good Lord, man. You had us worried! You have about ten seconds. Ten seconds more and you would have been dead."

Mayhem was too tired to care. Then he felt a wrenching pain, and all at once his *elan* floated, serene, peaceful, in limbo. He had been plucked from the dying body barely in time, to fight mankind's lone battle against the stars again, wherever he was needed . . . out beyond Pluto.

Forever? It wasn't impossible.

THE END

THE THING ON THE MOON

An Impossible But True Feature . . .

By A. MORRIS & MALCOLM SMITH

(See Front cover)

IN 1788 in the Lunar Alps, a man was intent on observing the surface of the moon. This man, named Schroeter, saw what appeared at first to be a light, but a short time later became what seemed to be a large shadow, vaguely round. It was of an almost indefinable nature, and yet seemed to have the similar outlines that a gigantic crow might have, a crow that might have been flying through space and its shadow from the sun's rays was somewhat cast upon the moon's surface. Or, it might have been a planet speeding through the void, its shadow suddenly showing up on the moon.

Charles Fort, in his "Book of the Damned," would seem to agree with this latter view that the shadow was a luminous object near the moon suddenly lost to view, but then its shadow underneath was seen.

In 1879 two astronomers, H. C. Russell and G. D. Hirst, were observing the moon in the Blue mountains near Sydney, Australia. They saw a "large part of the moon covered with a dark shade, quite as dark as the shadow of the earth during an eclipse of the moon." Both men being scientists this was as far as they would care to go in their description. But the fact remains that they did *see* something, something impossible but true! And they were men who were well versed in astronomy and who knew that what they saw was not a part of the normal pattern of things.

Did they see an eclipse? If so, then it must have been an eclipse that science knew nothing about. Was it in actuality a living creature, much like a bird? If so, how could it have lived in the utter cold and lifelessness of outer space?

Only one thing is certain. The shadow, whatever it may have been, was seen by competent observers. An impossible shadow, but, nevertheless, true.

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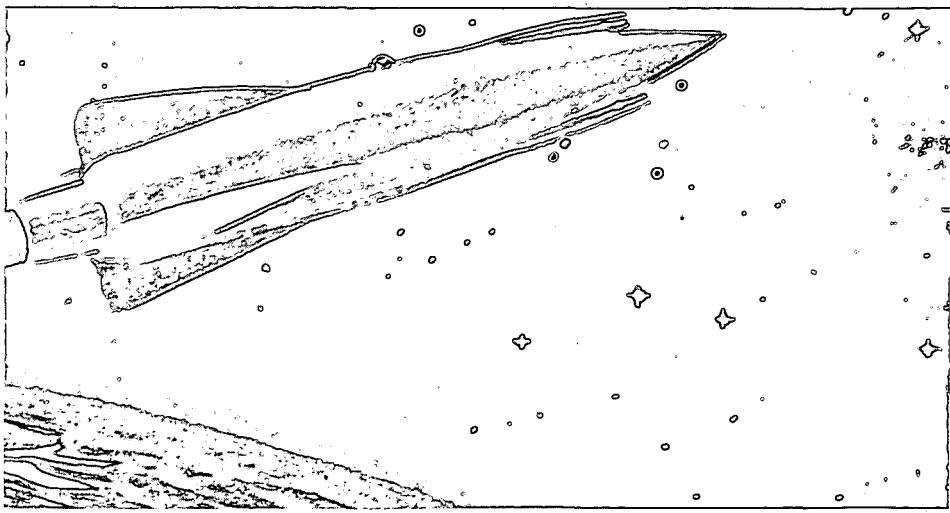

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